



The Red Mass

Why it Matters

The Red Mass occurs worldwide at the same general time each year. In the United States, the Red Mass is celebrated at the opening of the Supreme Court’s term, which takes place on the first Monday in October.

On October 14, 2022, the St. Thomas More Society of Southeast Texas will host the annual Red Mass at St. Anthony Cathedral Basilica in Beaumont. While the Red Mass is a centuries-old Catholic tradition, its central message is nevertheless ecumenical in nature and remains timely today. The ceremony is attended not only by Catholic members of the bench and bar, but also by judges and attorneys of all faiths, who unite to invoke the Holy Spirit and seek guidance from God for the continued fair and impartial administration of justice. The Red Mass commences with a procession of the judges in attendance, and it

is indeed remarkable and a bit awe-inspiring to watch our own local, state and federal jurists, draped in their judicial robes, proceed down the central aisle of the magnificent St. Anthony Cathedral Basilica at the beginning of the Red Mass ceremony each year.

One may ask, *Why does the Red Mass matter?* In a society facing unprecedented challenges and divisiveness, the Red Mass is a valuable means by which we are hopefully able to inspire and encourage those who strive to ensure that the fair and impartial dispensing of justice remains inviolate. Given the acrimonious times in which we are currently living, I would humbly submit that divine guidance for those who represent others at the altar of justice is something we should all seek as members of the legal profession. The Red Mass provides us with the perfect opportunity to do this.

HISTORY OF THE RED MASS

Although the exact date of its inception remains unclear, religious scholars have placed the Red Mass’s origins somewhere around the middle of the thirteenth century. Records of that era indicate that the Red Mass (so named because of the color of the vestments worn by the officiating clergy¹) was initially celebrated in France, England and Italy.

The Red Mass in France

In approximately 1248, King Louis IX (who later became Saint Louis) constructed the famous *La Sainte Chappelle* in Paris to house a precious relic from Jesus’ Holy Crown of Thorns, which Louis had obtained from Constantinople during the Crusades. For several centuries, *La Sainte Chappelle* was the chapel of the Order of Advocates, and was designed for the exclusive use of the Courts of Justice in Paris. Years later, the first Red Masses were celebrated in *La Sainte Chappelle* and various other parts of France in honor of the famous lawyer-saint Ives, who was born in Brittany in 1253 and eventually canonized by Pope Clement VI in 1347. Since St. Ives was the universal patron saint of lawyers, the French came to honor him in the Red Mass that was specifically offered to invoke the light of the Holy Spirit concerning the conduct of judges and lawyers.²

The Red Mass in England

The English tradition of the Red Mass began, as far as can be discerned, in approximately 1310 during the reign of King Edward I. From the time of the Red Mass’s inception in England, it was the custom for the entire bench and bar to attend the Red Mass at the opening of each term of court. In England, the judicial year was (and still is) divided into four terms: Hilary, Easter, Trinity and Michaelmas. On a date close to Michaelmas (the first term), the courts, Parliament and the universities all began their legal activities for the year. In the days of Edward I, twelve judges of the High Court sat on the King’s Bench at Westminster. These judges, who were all doctors of the law, wore the impressive robes unique to their positions and attended the Red Mass as a single body. Since the priest-celebrant (dressed in red) always offered a Votive Mass of the Holy Spirit, the judges, in conformity with ecclesiastical traditions, appeared at the Red Mass in robes of a deep liturgical red. The early tradition of celebrating the Red Mass at the beginning of

each of the four terms eventually lapsed into desuetude, and today the celebration in England occurs only once a year.

The Red Mass and the Roman Rota

The Red Mass has traditionally been closely associated with the Sacred Roman Rota, which is the supreme judicial body of the Catholic Church. The Rota itself was instituted during the reign of Pope Innocent IV, circa 1243, and whether the Red Mass began in the earliest days of the Rota, or came into being later, is unknown. However, historians have established that the Red Mass was created for the specific purpose of calling down divine assistance on the work of the Rota, and asking the Holy Spirit to inspire the Church’s judges in the performance of their ecclesiastical affairs.

The Red Mass in the United States

The Reverend William E. Cashin of St. Andrew’s Church in New York City initiated the tradition of the Red Mass in the United States in 1928, when he arranged the first Red Mass for the Guild of Catholic Lawyers in New York. Today, the Red Mass is celebrated in numerous cities, large and small, across the United States at the beginning of October. Records of the St. Thomas More Society of Southeast Texas indicate that our own local Red Mass was first celebrated in 1995.

CONCLUSION

It cannot be disputed that those of us who serve in the legal community have a unique and essential role in promoting unity, liberty, justice, and the overall common good of society. As the often-misinterpreted quote from Shakespeare’s *Dick the Butcher* suggests, society would quickly devolve into anarchy without lawyers and a strong legal system.³ It is therefore incumbent upon lawyers and judges to seek humility, knowledge, understanding, wisdom and courage through God’s intercession, and the Red Mass is a powerful reminder for people of faith that justice is inextricably linked to the sacred. The message of the Red Mass brings into sharp focus the fact that those who work to ensure justice are at the service of something larger and greater than themselves.

Please join the St. Thomas More Society of Southeast Texas on October 14, 2022, as we celebrate the venerable and worldwide tradition of the Red Mass.

¹ While it is probably true that the term “Red Mass” is attributable to the color of the vestments worn by the celebrants, some commentators have attached an even deeper meaning to the sobriquet. From its inception, the Red Mass was celebrated as an invocation of the Holy Spirit, and so close in the life of a lawyer are (1) the truth inspired by the Holy Spirit and (2) the lawyer’s willingness to defend that truth at the cost of his or her own life, that it takes little imagination to link the two ideas together during the celebration of the Red Mass. According to this interpretation of the name, the attorney implores the assistance of God with regard to her work during the Red Mass, and asks the Holy Spirit to keep her true to the ends of justice even if it means shedding her blood. Thus, some historians believe this deep devotion is what is actually meant by the term “Red Mass.”

² Interestingly, in 1906 the French government determined that the observance of Red Mass by the elite of the Paris bar was inimical to the conception of “liberty of conscious” (which is the freedom of all individuals to choose the religious creed they wish to embrace, or to embrace none at all). Consequently, the French government passed a resolution that secularized *La Sainte Chappelle* and proscribed any further celebrations of the Red Mass. However, during World War I, and as a sign of respect to the lawyers who had died in battle, a temporary suspension of the resolution was obtained by the Paris Bar, and once again the *Messe Rouge* was celebrated by the legal community in Paris. The (and in my humble opinion, specious) question of whether the celebration of the Red Mass by members of the bar and judiciary somehow violates the First Amendment’s directives concerning the separation of church and state is far beyond the scope of this brief article.

³ See Shakespeare, W., *Henry VI*, Part 2, Act IV, Scene 2.