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'Red Mass' returns to Allentown

Catholic service for judges, lawyers and government officials is a tradition dating to the Middle Ages.

By Daniel Patrick Sheehan, OF THE MORNING CALL

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On Sunday, judges, lawyers and politicians from across the Lehigh Valley — and from across the religious and political spectrums — will enter the Cathedral of St. Catharine of Siena in Allentown and take part in a Catholic tradition rooted in 13th century Europe.

It's called the Red Mass — a celebration of the liturgy in which the Holy Spirit is asked to bless everyone involved in the work of the law.

Hundreds are expected to attend the 2 p.m. Mass, which is open to the public and will be principally celebrated by Bishop John O. Barres. While Red Masses have been held elsewhere in the diocese in recent years, this will be the first in Allentown since 1993, when the late Bishop Thomas Welsh led the five-county region.

"We call upon the Holy Spirit to help all in the legal field that the Lord might be with them as they carry out a very important service of society, which is justice," said Monsignor Andrew Baker, the cathedral's pastor.

Sunday's Mass is sponsored by the newly formed St. Thomas More Society of the Diocese of Allentown. The group is named for the author, lawyer and statesman executed in 1535 for maintaining allegiance to Rome when King Henry VIII declared himself head of the church in England.

While Catholic-oriented, "It's really to bring together people of any faith who are engaged in the legal profession to nurture an ethical formation, a cooperation, and to inspire them by the example of St. Thomas More," Baker said.

Society President Paul Essig, an attorney in Reading, said there have long been county-level More societies in Berks and Schuylkill counties.

Essig is excited by the prospects for the diocesan-wide group. Besides the Mass, it is sponsoring a seminar at DeSales in January that will examine More's trial from a modern legal perspective.

"The potential programs the attorneys can participate in is up to the imagination," said Essig, who has been in the profession for 46 years. "It could be any subject matter, legally speaking. We're hoping to have the seminars approved for the credit hours attorneys have to have each year."

Essig said the Berks society has sponsored a Red Mass for the past 18 years. He is pleased that the ceremony is returning to the diocese's central church.

According to the Rev. Thomas Dailey, head of the Salesian Center for Faith and Culture at DeSales University, the first Red Mass was held in 1245 at a Paris chapel built by King Louis IX of France, who was later canonized as St. Louis.

In England, around 1310, the celebration became traditional at the opening of each court term, as an occasion for pageantry and solemnity among those working in the legal professions.

The term "Red Mass" arose because the celebrants wore red vestments, a color traditionally symbolizing the Holy Spirit, and the judges of the High Court wore red robes, signifying that they were doctors of the law.

The tradition came to the United States in 1928, where the first Red Mass was celebrated at St. Andrew's Church in New York City. It continues now in more than half of the states. The most prominent is held annually in Washington, D.C, where Supreme Court justices, members of Congress, diplomats, government officials and occasionally the president gather for the event.

The sight of judges and politicians at a Catholic Mass has prompted consternation among church-state separatists over the years. But Baker said the event must be regarded in the proper context — as a gesture of good will to all civil authorities, of whatever faith.

"It is certainly well-rooted in our American tradition that there is a distinction between church and state," he said. "Yet at the same time, we are a religious people. The church respects and prays for government officials, even going back to the letters of St. Peter where he advises the people to pray for the civil authorities."

While the Mass will be held close to Election Day, "it's not a political rally," Baker added. "It's calling God's blessing upon those involved in the law — God's blessing without taking sides, and distinct from political parties."

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The Red Mass

- **What:** A Mass offered for judges, lawyers and others involved in the work of the law.
- **Where:** The Cathedral of St. Catharine of Siena, 18th and Turner streets, Allentown.
- **When:** 2 p.m. Sunday
- **Who can go:** The public is welcome
- **Information on St. Thomas More Society:** <http://www.stmsallentown.org>