

Faith in justice: Religious traditions inform work of local legal professionals

10/18/2020

BY NICKI GORNY / THE BLADE



Toledo judges sit in the front row during the 14th annual Red Mass at the Rosary Cathedral in Toledo.

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How is the jurist informed by her faith?

It was the question that seemed to be at the edges of the confirmation hearings this week on Capitol Hill, after weeks of pundits and political commentators more openly wondering aloud about Amy Coney Barrett, the circuit court judge whom President Donald Trump nominated to a vacant seat on the U.S. Supreme Court in late September.

Judge Barrett — as is well known by now to anyone following the proceedings — is Catholic. Her ties to a charismatic community within the denomination, more specifically, have drawn attention and raised questions about her beliefs in her personal and in her public life: To what extent does the former inform the latter? What would this mean for Americans?

Northwest Ohio presents a different set of stakes and circumstances for jurists of faith, who aren't hard to find in local law firms and courtrooms.

The St. Thomas More Society just earlier this month put on the Red Mass in Our Lady, Queen of the Most Holy Rosary, for example, to invoke divine blessing and guidance for judges, lawyers, law students and others who work as stewards of justice in the legal community. The St. Thomas More Society is affiliated with the Diocese of Toledo.

While some jurists of faith said they've navigated the occasional tension between their faith and their work, several who shared how they see one informing the other in conversations with The Blade said they generally see the two as easily compatible. They see parallels between the values they uphold as professionals and the values they uphold as Catholics, Jews, or Muslims.

"We have in our teachings a high respect for justice, and it's taught to us from a very young age," said Ammar Alo, a private practice attorney with Alo Legal. He said he in part internalized these values as a student of the Toledo Islamic Academy. "With that foundation, it helps me navigate the laws and navigate my practice, because there is a lot of injustice out in the world. Attorneys have to stand with those ... who are victims of injustice and help them."

The St. Thomas More Society's Tom Dillon, an attorney with Shumaker, Loop and Kendrick, thinks about the values that are specifically outlined in what's known as the lawyer's creed and aspirational ideals in Ohio.

"It's things like being honest with your client, being honest with the court, acting with integrity, even though you may be under significant pressure to bend and do the wrong thing," said Mr. Dillon, who specifically serves as chairman of his firm's management committee and as the managing partner in Toledo. "All of those concepts are incredibly consistent, I think, with being a lawyer and a person of faith."

He sees in the lawyer's creed and aspirational ideals, too, an "inherent integrity and value of the individual person," he said — another idea that he sees in keeping with all the major faith traditions of the world, including his own as a Catholic.

"In my opinion, it dovetails perfectly," he said. "There's no conflict. They're completely complementary, the faith beliefs and the lawyers' creed and aspirational ideals."

A role in the legal community in some cases positions a person to act on the values of their faith tradition, as Mr. Alo suggested. In working primarily in immigration and personal injury law, he said he sees himself in a position to help clients who have been wronged, be it by an individual or an agency or an immigration system that is keeping families apart.

Peter Silverman sees it in his work, too. He focuses on dispute resolution as a partner at Shumaker, Loop and Kendrick.

"Every week in Judaism, you read and study the Bible. And the constant message in almost every part of the Bible is to love your neighbor, love the stranger and for there to be justice in society," he said. "And so part of the faith is just a sense that there's a purpose to life, and the purpose to life is helping others. Being a lawyer is very much involved in helping others."

That's not just in the traditional constraints of an office job, either, he said. He's able to help his community and his synagogue when legal matters arise, for example.

"And also getting involved in social justice issues or politics or community boards, which you can do as a lawyer," he added.

He's done so numerous times in his career, including past seats on the Toledo Board of Education and Toledo City Council; he's currently sitting on the Community-Police Relations and Reform Committee. These positions don't require that members be lawyers, but Mr. Silverman said he recognizes that his profession positions him well to serve in this capacity.

Questions of personal and professional belief are perhaps muddier for judges, as journalists and political commentators have been exploring in recent weeks in regard to Judge Barrett. While her faith came up in hearings this week, legislators generally refrained from asking her about it directly, instead framing their most critical questions around her judicial beliefs.

Lucas County Common Pleas Judge Michael Goulding and retired Ohio Supreme Court Justice Judith Ann Lanzinger each shared a local perspective from the bench, saying that they recognized a place for faith in their work.

Each is Catholic and involved in the St. Thomas More Society; Judge Goulding is its chairman.

Judge Goulding said he thinks about basic faith tenets against bearing false witness or loving one's neighbor when he says that he thinks his faith informs his work.

"That manifests in different ways depending on what your job is, whether you're a lawyer or a judge or an accountant or a doctor or a laborer. I think as a judge, it's probably a little more nuanced; it's not overt," he said.

"But I think you begin with the realization that everyone that you're dealing with — whether a defendant in a criminal case, or a party in a civil case or an attorney, a paralegal, anyone else involved in the work of the court — that first of all we're all human," he continued. "We make mistakes and as part of the justice that the courts have to administer, we have to take that into account. Nobody is perfect, and the justice that we dispense has to be tempered by both mercy and by the rule of law."

Justice Lanzinger served on the Toledo Municipal Court, Lucas County Common Pleas Court, and the Sixth District Court of Appeals before the Ohio Supreme Court; her retirement from the state's highest court was forced by age in late 2016. She said she recognized in her career the influence of the years she spent as a postulant and a novice with the Sisters of St. Francis.

"That experience of six years in the convent was very formative for me," she said. "And I'm very grateful for the experience. It taught me many things about myself, and about the importance of service to the community."

Her court experience on occasion put her at odds with her faith, she said, pointing to perhaps the most obvious example in capital punishment. The Catholic Church opposes the death penalty.

Whenever the question arose during her campaigns, Justice Lanzinger recalled that she always replied that she would follow the law when it came to imposing the death penalty. And she actually did so at one point.

“It turned out that down the road, after appeals, that individual was allowed to have his sentence transmuted to life without parole,” she recalled. “But I did fulfill my duty and my obligation under the civil law.”

In a field that often sees personal and professional beliefs align, it's the sort of tension between the two that naturally draws questions.

Most recently, those questions are centered on Capitol Hill.

Would Judge Barrett be able to shelve her personal beliefs to adhere to the law?, Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, asked her during the nomination hearing this week.

Judge Barrett replied affirmatively.

“I can. I have done that,” she said. “I will do that still.”

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