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The Votive Mass of the Holy Spirit

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*This article is based upon "The Red Mass, A Legal and Judicial Tradition," by Edward R. Tiedebohl, Esq., 18 University of Detroit Law Journal 59 (1954).**

The Votive Mass of the Holy Spirit

The Red Mass appears to have been an almost spontaneous adoption of the Mass, the Church's age old expression of dependence on God, to the peculiar needs and institutions of the courts and the law.

In essence, the Mass was instituted as an invocation to the Holy Spirit, soliciting His assistance during the coming term of court.

Although the exact date of its inception is unknown, available documentation places its origin somewhere around the middle of the thirteenth century. Records of that era show that the Red Mass (so designated because of the color of the vestments worn by the officiating clergy) was celebrated principally in France, Italy and England.

The Red Mass in France

The venerable King Louis IX, who was later raised to the altars as Saint Louis, built in Paris the famous *La Sainte Chappelle* to house the precious relic of the Holy Crown of Thorns which he had obtained from Constantinople while on the Crusades. For many centuries *La Sainte Chapelle* was the chapel of the Order of Advocates and was designed for the exclusive use of the Courts of Justice.

As the years passed, the *Messe Rouge* in certain parts of France was celebrated in honor of the famous lawyer-saint, Ives. Born in Brittany in 1253 A.D., Ives was canonized in 1347 A.D. His feast is celebrated on the nineteenth of May. Since St. Ives is the universal patron of lawyers, it is understandable that the French should honor him, particularly, in the Mass which was primarily offered to invoke the light of the Holy Spirit on the conduct of the courts and the law.

However, in 1906, a majority in the *Parlement* considered such an observance of religious faith by the elite of the Paris Bar, if not of the nation, to be offensive to their current conception of liberty of conscience. Thus, a resolution was passed secularizing the *Chappelle* and prohibiting the celebration of the *Messe Rouge*. However, during the Great War, as a mark of respect to the lawyers who had died in the battle for France and humanity, a temporary suspension of the resolution was obtained by the Paris Bar, and once again the *Messe Rouge* was celebrated by the Cardinal-Archbishop of Paris.

The Red Mass in England

The English tradition of the Red Mass began, as far as can be ascertained, about the year 1310, during the reign of Edward I.

*Reprints of this article with the Votive Mass of the Holy Spirit appended are available by contacting the University of Detroit Law Journal, 651 E. Jefferson, Detroit 26, Mich.

From the time of its inception 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 legal year was divided into four terms: Hilary, Easter, Trinity and Michaelmas. The feast of St. Hilary came on January 11th; St. Michael's on September 29th. On a date close to Michaelmas, the first term, the courts, Parliament and the universities all began the legal activities of 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 belonging to that office and attended the Red Mass in a body. Again, tradition seems to be unable to determine the exact location of the principal Mass. It was celebrated either in the famous Chapel of Saint Stephen in the palace of Westminster or in Westminster Abbey itself. Due to the confusion on this point, it is highly possible that the Masses were celebrated first in one and then in the other on alternate terms.

Since the priest-celebrant, or more properly the Cardinal-Archbishop, garbed in red vestments, always offered a Votive Mass of the Holy Spirit, the judges, conforming to the ecclesiastical traditions, appeared at the Mass in a deep liturgical red. It is interesting to note, as some historians wish to point out, that this scarlet of the early judges became the distinctive hue of the later university doctoral gowns.

In England in more recent times, notably from the late eighteen hundreds until the early nineteen hundreds, the Red Mass has been celebrated at the Chapel of Saints Anselm and Cecilia, Lincoln's-Inn-Fields, commonly known as the Sardinian Chapel (from its former connection with the Sardinian Embassy). In 1904, however, the

Mass was moved to the new cathedral in Ashley Gardens where it is now celebrated on October 24th.

The early tradition of celebrating Mass at the beginning of each of the four terms gradually lapsed into desuetude, and today in England the celebration of the Red Mass occurs only at the beginning of the court year.

The Mass and the Roman Rota

The Red Mass has always been closely identified with the Sacred Roman Rota, the supreme judicial body of the Roman Catholic Church. The Rota itself was instituted during the reign of Innocent IV, circa 1243 A.D. It was this same Innocent who appointed auditors of the Rota as the first permanent jurists for the provinces of the pontifical states.

Whether the Red Mass began in the earliest days of the Rota or was of later institution is unknown. It has been established, however, that the Red Mass was inaugurated for the specific purpose of calling down divine assistance on the work of the Rota and asking the Holy Spirit to inspire these judges in the conduct of their ecclesiastical affairs.

Significance Behind the Mass

It is most probable that the expression "Red Mass" is attributable to the color of the gowns worn by the jurists and the vestments worn by the celebrants. Many, however, would attach an even deeper meaning to the appellation.

From the beginning, this Mass was celebrated as an invocation of the Holy Spirit. The red robes and the red vestments of the celebrant were the red of Christian signifi-

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VOTIVE MASS (*continued*)

cance. So close in the life of the lawyer is the truth inspired by the Holy Spirit and the willingness to defend that truth at the cost of blood that it takes little effort for the Christian lawyer to join the two together as he stands at the beginning of the term of court. He implores the help of God on his work and asks the Holy Spirit to keep him true to the truth of justice even to the shedding of blood. This devotion then is called the Red Mass.

The Mass Today

The late Right Reverend William E. Cashin of St. Andrew's Church of New York City had the honor of initiating the

tradition of the Red Mass in the United States. In 1928 he arranged for the celebration of the first Red Mass for the Guild of Catholic Lawyers of New York City.

There are today eighteen cities in the United States where the Red Mass is celebrated* and twenty-one others contemplating such an observance in the near future.

*Boston, Massachusetts; Chicago, Illinois; Cincinnati, Ohio; Detroit, Michigan; Dubuque, Iowa; Joliet, Illinois; Kansas City, Missouri; New Orleans, Louisiana; New York, New York; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Rockford, Illinois; St. Louis, Missouri; St. Paul, Minnesota; San Francisco, California; Topeka, Kansas; Tucson, Arizona; Washington, D. C.

