

Pope Francis Speaks to the Law Commencement Class of 2015

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Each year I have a different message for the graduating students of Seattle University's School of Law. These messages come to me from what I have experienced during the year. The highlight of this past year for me was making possible for a family and for myself a 45-minute conversation with Pope Francis on November 4th in the pope's library in Rome. (Let me tell you as an aside that when a friend came to me and told me that he had asked his elderly Mom at Christmas if there was anything in the world he could do for her, and got the response, "Yes, I'd like to meet the pope" and when he came to me and said "Fr. Steve I want you to make it happen that my Mom meets the pope" I had one chance at access through a very close associate of the pope and I put myself on the line to ask for this private meeting or, as a friend says, that to bring this off I pushed all my chips across the table, emptied my pockets and added it to the pile, threw in my watch, and melted down two chalices. It worked.) There is a message from that rare conversation with Pope Francis to you at this commencement and for your career in the law at the service of justice ahead of you.

Pope Francis told us in that circle of a dozen of us that we all live in a war zone and are like people who operate a field hospital in the midst of war. We are all surrounded by the wounded, the rejected, the disposed of, the discriminated against, those held of no account in our society and in our economy. These are the wounded in the war zone in which we operate a field hospital. In such a situation we don't ask, he says, for the identity papers of the wounded, we don't check the cholesterol count of someone whose life is threatened, and we don't hold meetings about theories of justice. Rather, we reach out to see, to touch, to bind up, to heal, to relieve pain, to restore life, to save.

A simple question, then, for you and for me and for all of us: What if our law offices, our presidential suites, our business cubicles, our homes, our neighborhoods, our churches, our places of association really are field hospitals? How does that call us to act? What priority of persons does it require of us? How does it inform your mission of "a life in the law at the service of justice"?

This pope is a challenge! We may admire his avuncular warmth, his "who am I to judge" manner, and his friendly outreach... but he does not go down easily.

Really everything he is about, and says, and does is summed up in one word: "mercy". That's where the field hospital comes from, and it is also in terms of "mercy" that he challenges us to expand our understanding of "justice". He says, and I quote:

Justice and mercy... are not two contradictory realities, but two dimensions of a single reality that unfolds progressively until it culminates in love... Mercy is not opposed to justice but is God's way of reaching out (to us)... mere justice is not enough. Experience shows that an appeal to justice alone will result in destruction. This is why God goes

beyond justice with his mercy and forgiveness... God does not deny justice. He rather envelopes it and surpasses it with an even greater event in which we experience love as the foundation of true justice.

(Misericordiae Vultus, #20-23)

I wish I had another 45 minutes together with you, professors and graduating law students and families in the library of the pope to have a Socratic dialogue with Pope Francis about this relation of justice and mercy, especially that line of his, "Experience shows that an appeal to justice alone will result in its destruction." But I can't bring you on a trip to Rome and wrangle a private conversation with the pope, because I cashed in all my chips this last year. I must leave you graduates and you law professors, and you family members, and me in the field hospital of the war and the wounded all around us, and let each of us, by acting, to learn how justice surpasses itself through mercy and becomes love which is the foundation of true justice. This can only make sense in the truth of who the human person is, the truth of who we are, and the truth of those we seek to serve and to learn from. That's a good place to stop... and to commence.