

Role of Law Award Response

**86th Annual Convention of the
Canon Law Society of America
Albuquerque, New Mexico
October 16, 2024**

*Most Rev. Thomas John Paprocki, JCD, JD**

Canon Law is Your Friend

It is a great honor for me to accept the Role of Law Award from the Canon Law Society of America. I have been a member of the Canon Law Society of America since 1985, and over the past thirty-nine years it has been a privilege getting to know my fellow canon lawyers by attending these annual conventions. In addition to helping me to stay up to date with what is happening in the world of canon law, these conventions have provided an opportunity to meet and interact with other canon lawyers. Over the years many of you have become not only professional colleagues, but also good friends. I am grateful to count among those good friends our President, Father Ken Riley, so it is especially gratifying to receive this Role of Law Award from his hands. Thank you, Ken!

There are six people – all now deceased – whom I would like to acknowledge by name, for without their guidance and inspiration I would most likely not be here receiving this award.

** Bishop of Springfield in Illinois; Adjunct Professor of Law, Ave Maria School of Law; and Chairman, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Committee on Canonical Affairs and Church Governance.*

The first two are my parents, the late John H. Paprocki, Jr., and Veronica Mary Paprocki. It is through them that I was not only brought into the world, but into the Catholic faith as well. Their devotion to Our Lord was authentic and deep, expressed in their love for each other and their nine children, of which I was the third oldest. They exemplified the Catholic way of life so wonderfully for me and my six brothers and two sisters that I was inspired at a young age to want to become a priest. My desire to be a priest goes back as far as I can remember. In fact, my mother says I started talking about wanting to be a priest when I was about four years old!

Of course, then, I used to “play Mass” as a young boy. My older sister, Ramona, would dress up like a nun, and my younger brothers would be the altar boys. Other children from the neighborhood would attend my “Masses.” As any good pastor would, I took up a collection! Well, we used Monopoly money, so we were not taking anyone’s real money, but it was gratifying to see them drop 100 and 500 dollar bills into the basket! We used grape juice instead of wine and oyster crackers for hosts. The name of my pretend parish was Sacred Heart Parish, hence the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus that appears on my episcopal coat of arms.

Perhaps you will be disappointed to know that, as a young boy pretending to be a priest, I never aspired to be a canon lawyer, probably because I had never heard of canon law or canon lawyers! In fact, even when I learned about canon law in the seminary, I was not drawn to it, I felt called to study civil law, not to become a lawyer as an alternative to the priesthood, but as I would describe it, as a tool for ministry. Let me explain.

While I was in the seminary learning about Catholic social teaching, I discerned that I did not want just to talk about helping the poor, but was determined to do something concrete to help the poor. Thus, after my priesthood ordination, while I was in my first assignment as a parish priest in South Chicago, I enrolled in DePaul College of Law, where I obtained my civil law (J.D.) degree in 1981. That same year, I passed the Illinois bar and co-founded the South Chicago Legal Clinic with a law school classmate of mine, and we began providing legal services for the poor, many of whom were unemployed due to the recent layoffs and closings of the steel mills that used to flourish in that area. My specialty was immigration law, assisting the many Hispanic immigrants who had come to work in the steel mills. That was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life: being a parish priest with a specialized ministry in helping the poor through legal services. As the saying goes, if you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans!

Just a few months after we launched the South Chicago Legal Clinic, Archbishop Joseph Bernardin was appointed Archbishop of Chicago on July 10, 1982. I met with him shortly after his installation to tell him what I was doing, since practicing law as a parish priest was something somewhat out of the ordinary. He gave me his blessing to keep doing what I was doing, but with the reminder that, as a priest-lawyer, the priest always comes first. I have remembered that admonition and have practiced it to this day!

In 1983, I was appointed Parochial Administrator of a small parish in South Chicago. There were only about 100 families in the parish, so it was small enough to allow me to continue my law practice with the South Chicago Legal Clinic.

Then, in 1985, Cardinal Bernardin asked me to serve as Vice-Chancellor of the Archdiocese of Chicago. He said it would be part-time so I could continue my ministry as Parochial Administrator of St. Joseph Parish and my legal work with the South Chicago Legal Clinic. As the steel mills were shutting down and people were losing their jobs, the Archdiocese of Chicago began a consolidation process of the parishes in South Chicago. At one point, there were eleven parishes in a six-block radius, originally founded for the various ethnic groups that had come to work in the steel mills. With the mills closing, my little 100-family parish did not survive. When it was closed, my chancery work became fulltime, while still trying as best I could to assist with the Legal Clinic.

As my workload at the Chancery increased, Cardinal Bernardin noted that I was doing more canon law than civil law for the Archdiocese, so he said it would be good for me to get a degree in canon law. Up until then, I had never really thought about studying canon law, but being obedient to my Archbishop, I was off to Rome to study at the Pontifical Gregorian University, where I obtained my doctorate in canon law (J.C.D.) in 1991. The following year, after having resumed my role as Vice-Chancellor for a few months, Cardinal Bernardin appointed me to serve as Chancellor of the Archdiocese of Chicago as his chief canon law advisor. Thus, I can say unequivocally that it was Cardinal Bernardin who introduced me to the world of canon law and put me on the trajectory to where I stand today.

After Cardinal Bernardin's death in 1996, he was succeeded by Archbishop Francis George, who, like his predecessor, was named to the College of Cardinals within a few months after his installation as Archbishop of Chicago. He kept me on as his Chancellor until the end of my second term, when he appointed me to serve as Pastor of a large parish near O'Hare Airport. In contrast to the small 100-family parish where I had served before, St. Constance Parish had 4,000 people attending Mass every Sunday, the majority of whom were recent immigrants from Poland. The two and a half years that I had the privilege of serving as Pastor of that parish were some of the happiest years of my life, for which I am deeply grateful. In 2003, I was appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago under Cardinal George and later continued to work with him as my Metropolitan Archbishop when I was appointed Bishop of the suffragan Diocese of Springfield in Illinois in 2010.

Cardinal Bernardin and Cardinal George were different personalities, but I learned enormously from their examples and consider both of them to have been invaluable mentors in my ministry as a priest and as a bishop.

The fifth now-deceased person whom I would like to acknowledge for his influence and inspiration in my life is a saint. Yes, I mean that literally: a canonized saint. That person is the great Pope Saint John Paul II.

I was ordained a priest in May of 1978, and John Paul II was elected Pope just five months later, on October 16, 1978. He would serve as Supreme Pontiff of the Catholic Church for the next twenty-six and a half years of my priesthood. As Pope John Paul II

used to say, there are no coincidences, only God's providence. Thus, I think it is providential that I am receiving this Role of Law Award today on the forty-sixth anniversary of the election of Karol Wojtyła as Pope John Paul II.

I studied canon law in Rome 1987 to 1991, in many ways the peak of the vibrancy and energy of his pontificate, as that period of time witnessed the end of the Soviet Union and the collapse of communist domination in Poland and the other former Soviet-satellite states. I visited Poland in 1988 and spent the summer of 1989 studying Polish at the Catholic University of Lublin, learning the language, history, and culture of my ancestors and of our Polish Pope. During the years of my canon law studies in Rome, I had the opportunity to meet Pope John Paul II several times, including a Mass at Castel Gandolfo that I attended with my parents who came to Rome as a gift from my siblings and me for their fortieth wedding anniversary. My Dad did the reading at the Mass and the Pope greeted my parents and me after Mass to wish them a happy fortieth wedding anniversary!

It was Pope John Paul II who appointed me to serve as Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago in 2003. At the conclusion of the conference for new bishops in Rome that Fall—or as many people call it, “Baby Bishops School”—Pope John Paul II gave each of us new bishops a pectoral cross. I am wearing that pectoral cross today, and whenever I put on this pectoral cross over my chest and my heart, I think affectionately of the great Pope Saint John Paul II.

Of course, it was Pope John Paul II who promulgated the *Code of Canon Law* in 1983, which remains for the most part the *ius vigens* of the Latin Church today. It is in his Apostolic Constitution, *Sacrae Disciplinae Leges*, by which he promulgated the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*, where we find a most cogent and succinct summary of the role of law in the Church:

In actual fact the *Code of Canon Law* is extremely necessary for the Church. Since, indeed, it is organized as a social and visible structure, it must also have norms: in order that its hierarchical and organic structure be visible; in order that the exercise of the functions divinely entrusted to her, especially that of sacred power and of the administration of the sacraments, may be adequately organized; in order that the mutual relations of the faithful may be regulated according to justice based upon charity, with the rights of individuals guaranteed and well defined; in order, finally, that common initiatives, undertaken for a Christian life ever more perfect may be sustained, strengthened and fostered by canonical norms.

Finally, the canonical laws by their very nature must be observed. The greatest care has therefore been taken to ensure that in the lengthy preparation of the Code the wording of the norms should be accurate, and that they should be based on a solid juridical, canonical and theological foundation.

After all these considerations it is to be hoped that the new canonical legislation will prove to be an efficacious means in order that the Church may progress in conformity with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, and may every day be ever more suited to carry out its office of salvation in this world.¹

Just a few years after the promulgation of the 1983 *Code*, as I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the *Vindication and Defense of the Rights of the Christian Faithful through Administrative Recourse in the Local Church*, and in subsequent years as I practiced canon law, I sought as best I could to put these principles on the role of law in Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Constitution into practice.

The director of my doctoral dissertation was the late Bishop Thomas Doran, who, at the time when I was a writing, was a Monsignor serving as a Prelate-Auditor of the Sacred Roman Rota. He was appointed Bishop of Rockford, Illinois, in 1994. When I was appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago in 2003, Bishop Doran was serving as Chairman of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Canon Law and Church Governance. Almost immediately after my episcopal ordination, Bishop Doran asked me to serve as a member of that committee. Somewhat to my surprise, every Chairman of that committee since then has asked me to stay on the committee, so I have been a member of the Committee on Canon Law and Church Governance throughout my episcopate, which now spans twenty-one years. It was also an honor that my brother bishops elected me to serve as Chairman of that committee from 2008 to 2011, and again for another three-year term as Chairman that began last November.

An interview published in *The Pillar* on October 7, 2022, bears the heading, "Bishop Paprocki thinks 'canon law is your friend.' Here's why." In that interview, I explained:

I really do love the way St. John Paul II wrote about the pastoral dimension of the law.

And here's the way I put it in very simple words: I say that canon law can be your friend.

And that's from my perspective having worked with canon law for a number of years. What I mean by that is that canon law gives us guidance.

If you go back to the very first book in the Bible, the Book of Genesis — the story of creation is about how God brings order out of chaos.

Now nobody likes chaos! And without law, we would be in a very chaotic world.

And so, on questions about governing a diocese, or about how a pastor governs and provides pastoral care for his parish — if there were no canons, and if there were no policies or guidelines, then it would be a free-for-all. And that would be, I think, very overwhelming for everybody.

I was talking to a bishop being appointed to a diocese suddenly, and feeling like he'll go in there and have to figure it out from scratch.

Well, no, you don't have to figure it out from scratch. We have canons that are very clear and very specific. There is a lot of discretion allowed there, and judgment calls that a bishop has to make, but at the same time, there are clear guides to help us in our decision-making.

I find that helpful, and even consoling.²

Thus, I am grateful to the six people I named who guided and inspired me in the world of canon law: my parents, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, Cardinal Francis George, Bishop Thomas Doran, and Pope Saint John Paul II. There are others who greatly influenced my ministry as a canon lawyer, some present in this room this evening, but please do not feel slighted if I did not mention you, because I chose to mention only those who have gone before us and for whom we pray are now resting in the peace of God's kingdom. I do look forward with great hope to that day when we can all be reunited to live forever in presence of the Holy Trinity with all the saints and angels in the Heavenly Court, for He has called us out of darkness into His own wonderful light.³

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Apostolic Constitution, *Sacrae Disciplinae Leges*, of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II for the promulgation of the new *Code of Canon Law*, January 25, 1983; accessed online October 1, 2024, at: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_25011983_sacrae-disciplinae-leges.html.

² "Bishop Paprocki thinks 'canon law is your friend.' Here's why," *The Pillar*, October 7, 2022; accessed online October 1, 2024, at: <https://www.pillaratholic.com/p/bishop-paprocki-thinks-canon-law-is-your-friend-heres-why>.

³ Cf. Preface I for the Sunday in Ordinary Time, *The Roman Missal*, Third Typical Edition, 2011.