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## Dean Joseph O'Meara

Theodore M. Hesburgh C.S.C.  
*University of Notre Dame*

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## Dean Joseph O'Meara

Each of us, by the life we live, preaches a sermon to our family and friends. Simply by the way we live, we profess our values, our priorities, our faith. Throughout his life, Dean O'Meara has preached a sermon to many, not deliberately, but truly by the life he lived.

Like the rest of us, Joe had his vital statistics. He was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, on November 8, 1898. He studied at Xavier University for his Bachelor of Arts degree and received his Bachelor of Laws degree from the University of Cincinnati College of Law. For thirty-one years, he practiced law there, a Democratic lawyer with mostly Republican clients. For him, the law was the law, not a political following.

In 1951-1952, my predecessor, Father John Cavanaugh, was looking for a successor to his dear friend and then law school dean, Dean Clarence "Pat" Manion. The Search Committee looked far and wide without notable success. Then one of our Holy Cross priests remembered a letter from Supreme Court Justice Sherman Minton, noting his top candidate for a great law school dean—Joseph O'Meara of Cincinnati. We asked Joe to visit Notre Dame, and I remember interviewing him. He was anything but job seeking. "What do you think of our Law College?" I asked. He replied, as laconic as ever, "You have a night school operating in the daytime." "Do you know Catholic philosophy?" I continued. "I studied it, but I don't think I know it." "Would you like to be dean?" "You wouldn't like me, I'd be very difficult and demanding." I was sold, as was the rest of the Committee and Father Cavanaugh. Once dean, even when asked if he might consent to be considered for an appointment to the United States Supreme Court, he said, again laconically, "I came here to do a job and, God willing, I mean to stay and finish it.

Stay he did, for sixteen years, from 1952 to 1968. And a job he did, too. Immediately the budget went up, and the student body numbers went down. The budget went up because, true to his word, he demanded a special subsidy to build up the law library and double the faculty. Scholarships for promising students went from none in 1952, when he began, to more than 150 a few years later, mainly through revitalizing the Notre Dame Law Association. Student numbers went down because standards went up drastically. The curriculum was tightened, cumulative exams were introduced,

and a whole variety of new courses and student organizations were established to heighten the students' perception of law practice and education for what it really means to be a truly responsible and professional lawyer.

Once the word spread abroad, the hard years were behind us. The number and quality of students rose perceptibly, so that when he had completed his program, only a few of the promising freshmen and no upperclassmen failed. Some measure of his success is found in a study of results from the Ohio Bar Exams: "Messrs. Diefenbach and Glenn (the authors of study) selected four law schools—Harvard, Michigan, Notre Dame, and Yale—because these four out-of-state schools. . . are, or at least include, the best in the country."<sup>1</sup>

Through it all, Dean O'Meara had one simple goal which he never ceased to enunciate: "Excellence is our platform, and we can be content with nothing less." He also indicated the price of this excellence. "It required," he wrote, "on the part of the Law School, the highest of standards and on the part of the students, sustained hard work." He himself worked harder than anyone else.

In the final Bulletin of the Law School, the year of his retirement, he wrote as a kind of last will and testament:

"Drawing inspiration . . . from the Christian tradition, the Law School, while aiming first of all at technical proficiency, aims at more than that. Its primary purpose is to impart the knowledge and cultivate the skills a lawyer needs to represent his clients efficiently in a twentieth century workaday world. But professional competence is not enough. The Law School believes lawyers and law schools must face the great questions concerning the nature of man and of society, the origin and purpose of law and the lawyer's role in society. . . . [T]he School systematically endeavors to illuminate the great jurisprudential issues which . . . insistently press for answer; and to make clear the ethical principles and inculcate the ideals which should actuate a lawyer. The School believes that the lawyer is best served, and the community as well, if he possesses not only legal knowledge and legal skills but also a profound sense of the ethics of his profession—and . . . pride in the legal profession and a fierce partisanship for justice."<sup>2</sup>

This is vintage O'Meara, the dean at the fullness of his vision, especially the last phrase, "a fierce partisanship for justice." He insti-

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1 Harper, *Ohio Bar Examination Results: Some Random Observations*, 36 OHIO B. 725, 732 (1963).

2 Bulletin of the Law School 7, reprinted in P. MOORE, C.S.C., *A CENTURY OF LAW AT NOTRE DAME* 111 (1969).

tuted the Legal Services Program for students to serve the local poor and to learn realistically what a fierce partisanship for justice could mean in their lives and in their profession. He continued to admonish his students, long after they graduated, at an international law conference in Jerusalem: "If the legal profession is not better, if justice is not better served because you became a lawyer and practiced and taught law, then you do not deserve to call yourself a Notre Dame lawyer." Strong words, but then his words were always few and strong.

In declining years, his legal ardor did not decline. He wrote an article in the *Notre Dame Lawyer* (now the *Notre Dame Law Review*) that almost burned the pages, as if he had dipped his pen in sulfuric acid rather than ink. He was commenting on the Supreme Court's decision on abortion. He knew that law was at its best when it defended the powerless. Who was more without power than the unborn who were, in his judgment, sacrificed to inanities like trimesters, undiscernible life, being without personhood? Joe's words are fierce, his logic unrelenting, his normal toughness multiplied many times over. In my heart of hearts I knew this was exactly what Joe meant when he prodded students to exercise a *fierce* partisanship for justice.

Joe has left his mark on many aspects of our lives and vocations here and, especially, on our Law School and on our thousands of Notre Dame lawyers. The day Joe died, I was praying my Breviary for him. I think it not fanciful, but rather providential, that the mid-day prayer that day had this antiphon and psalm that somehow encompasses his life and transcends the particularities and vital statistics that I have just recounted. May it be our dearest and truest remembrance of a great and earnest man who contributed mightily to the success of Notre Dame in the field of law.

Psalm 119: 121-128

I have done what is right and just:  
 let me not be oppressed.  
 Vouch for the welfare of your servant  
 lest the proud oppress me.  
 My eyes yearn for your saving help  
 and the promise of your justice.  
 Treat your servant with love  
 and teach me your commands.  
 I am your servant, give me knowledge;  
 then I shall know your will.

It is time for the Lord to act  
for your law has been broken.  
That is why I love your commands  
more than finest gold,  
why I rule my life by your precepts:  
I hate the ways of falsehood.

Lord, give a loving welcome to your servant.

*Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C.*