

2016

The Red Mass

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Recommended Citation

Notre Dame Law School, "The Red Mass" (2016). *The Red Mass*. 13.
https://scholarship.law.nd.edu/redmass_ndls/13

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THE RED MASS

The Mass of the Holy Spirit, or Red Mass, was authored in 802 by Alcuin, an ecclesiastic at the court of Charlemagne. Initially, it was not associated with the law and the judicature but was intended primarily to be a devotion to the Holy Spirit.

It was not until the rise of the universities in the twelfth century, with their new professional law faculties, that the Red Mass tradition started. Between 1100 and 1130, the Law School at Bologna developed into the leading center for legal studies under the direction of Irnerius. It is felt that he probably instituted the practice of commencing each academic year with a Special Mass.

In 1243, Pope Innocent IV created the Roman Rota, the highest court in the judicial system of the Catholic Church. It was the practice of the judges or "advisors" to invoke divine guidance and strength for their judicial duties by offering the Mass of the Holy Spirit.

The practice spread throughout Europe. King Louis IX of France built LaSainte Chapelle in 1248 for the celebration of such a Mass before the court terms commenced. This practice has continued, despite the destruction of the chapel in 1790 and its reconstruction under Louis-Philippe. However, now it is celebrated in Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois in Paris.

The name "Red Mass" did not attach until the practice of celebrating the Mass of the Holy Spirit (before Michaelmas Term, September 29) started in England under the reign of Edward I in 1307. The twelve judges of the King's Bench, clothed in their scarlet robes, in addition to the red vestments of the celebrant and augmented by the typically red robes of the academic doctors present, merited the new title. This tradition has continued down to today in Westminster Cathedral. Similarly Anglican services are held in Westminster Abbey.

The practice came to the United States in 1928. Patrick Cardinal Hayes celebrated a Red Mass for the bench and bar on October 6, 1928, at St. Andrew's on Duane Street in New York City. Subsequently, it spread to Chicago in 1934 and to other cities. In the United States, the Red Mass is usually sponsored by the Catholic Lawyers Guild. Custom in England and in the United States schedules the Mass for the re-opening of the Courts in the fall.