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The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty presented its 2023 Legal Service Award to Notre Dame Law School Dean [G. Marcus Cole](https://directory/g-marcus-cole/) on Thursday, May 25, at Becket's annual gala in New York City.

Becket selected Dean Cole to receive the award in recognition of his trailblazing expansion of the clinic concept in launching Notre Dame Law School's [Religious Liberty Initiative](http://religiousliberty.nd.edu/).

Dean Cole delivered the following remarks upon accepting the Legal Service Award.

I am deeply humbled and honored to receive this award among such august company. I think that it is a testament to the power of God that I, the most unlikely recipient of such an honor, should be selected to receive it.

I have spoken many times about the reasons why religious liberty is so precious to me. As a junior faculty member at Stanford Law School over 25 years ago, I opened a newspaper to see a photograph of Catholic nuns in habits. The story was about how these eight nuns had been approached by six young women who wanted to join their cloistered order. To absorb these women, the nuns needed to expand their convent. So they hired an architect, and submitted the plans to the San Mateo County board of supervisors. The board reviewed the plans, only to determine that the land upon which the convent sat was, in the words of one county official, "too valuable to be wasted on prayer." The county took the convent by eminent domain. I was outraged, but powerless to do anything to help the nuns.

So years later, while I was the Associate Dean at Stanford Law School, I was captivated by our newest faculty member, Michael McConnell, as he presented an idea for a new clinic: The Stanford Religious Liberty Clinic. Like many others, I was uncertain as to whether the idea would resonate with our students. Needless to say, it did, in no small part due to its founding director, Jim Sonne. Jim quickly built one of the most popular clinics at Stanford, second only to the Supreme Court Litigation Clinic.

In 2018, when I was asked by Father John Jenkins, the President of the University of Notre Dame, what I would do if I was appointed Dean of Notre Dame Law School, I did not hesitate. I told him that the most important issue facing our nation and the world is the threat to religious liberty. Religious persecution and intolerance are rampant, both in the United States and around the world. And I told him that Notre Dame, the preeminent

Catholic university in the western world, had to be in the conversation. In fact, Notre Dame had to be front and center in the fight for religious freedom. Notre Dame needs to lead this fight.

So I founded the Notre Dame Religious Liberty Initiative on the ideas of two great lawyers. The first is Seamus Hasson, the founder of Becket, a Notre Dame Law graduate, and student of the great Notre Dame Professor Charlie Rice. When I visited Jim Sonne at Stanford, I asked him what I should read if I were to do this. He gave me a copy of Seamus Hasson's "The Right to Be Wrong." I read it cover to cover, in one sitting.

The other great lawyer was Charles Hamilton Huston. Years ago, Clint Bolick of the Institute for Justice told me that he built IJ to mimic the model pioneered by Huston as he erected the strategy to take down *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

I designed the Notre Dame Religious Liberty Initiative to implement the ideas of Seamus Hasson, using the structure employed by Charles Hamilton Huston.

I then searched for someone to implement it, and Mark Rienzi pointed me to a true unicorn, a scholar and litigator by the name of Professor Stephanie Barclay. When I presented this idea to Stephanie, she decided in less than a week that she would be the one to make my dream a reality. And she has. She hired John Meiser, our Clinic Director, and we enlisted the expertise of Notre Dame scholars Rick Garnett and Nicole Garnett. This team has built the Notre Dame Religious Liberty Initiative into a force for good.

So I am grateful for this honor, but it is people like Michael McConnell, Jim Sonne, Stephanie Barclay, John Meiser, Rick Garnett, Nicole Garnett, Mark Rienzi, and especially Seamus Hasson and Charles Hamilton Huston who led me to this place.

And I am so grateful to God that He is using me, His most unlikely servant, to do His will to make the world a better place.

Thank you.



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