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## Associate Professor Amy Coney Barrett, Diploma Ceremony Address

Amy Coney Barrett  
*Notre Dame Law School*

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## AMY BARRETT Professor of the Year Commencement Speech

**T**hank you for this honor. Thank you, Class of 2006, for your ideas, your enthusiasm, and for the ways in which you have challenged me in the classroom. You've made it easy for me to call my job one of the best around.

I decided to talk to you today about what it might mean for you to be a different kind of lawyer. Three years ago, you decided to enroll at Notre Dame Law School on the promise that we were educating a different kind of lawyer. Now, as you prepare to leave us, you may well wonder whether that promise has been fulfilled in you. When you drive away from campus tonight or tomorrow to wherever you're headed, will you be a different kind of lawyer? Indeed, what does it even mean to be a different kind of lawyer in the Notre Dame tradition?

There are certainly many respects in which you will not be any different from your peers who have graduated from other law schools. To begin with, being a different kind of a lawyer does not mean that you have mastered a different body of law. There is no Catholic version of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, and the movie *My Cousin Vinny* taught you the same evidentiary principles observed by Domers and non-Domers alike. The law is a discipline, and it is one in which you are now well trained. When you begin your jobs, you will be able to hold your own with other graduates of the best law schools.

Sometimes we're tempted to say that a Notre Dame lawyer is a different kind of lawyer because he or she is an ethical lawyer. But that can't be right. Our profession is in pretty deep trouble if the only ethical lawyer is the different one. When you leave here, hold yourselves to the highest ethical standards, and be leaders in that regard. But maintaining high ethical standards ought to be something that characterizes our whole profession—not something that causes Notre Dame lawyers to stand apart.

So if being a different kind of lawyer is not defined by the body of knowledge you have mastered or by the ethical standards you are expected to maintain, might it be defined by the kind of law you choose to practice? The banner hanging in the main reading room says, "If you want peace, work for justice." Surely we can expect that, as a Catholic law school, our commitment to social justice will lead a higher-than-average percentage of you to choose to work on behalf of the disadvantaged and oppressed. We can expect Notre Dame lawyers like my own classmate, Sean Litton, who left a successful and lucrative practice at Kirkland & Ellis to work for a human rights organization with the mission of eliminating sexual trafficking in southeast Asia. Many of you, like my classmate Sean, will work in the public interest sector, and Notre Dame will be proud of you. But many of you will work in the private sector, and Notre Dame will be proud of you too. It cannot be that being a different kind of lawyer is defined by the kind of law one practices, for that would leave too many of our graduates out of the definition.



So what then, does it mean to be a different kind of lawyer? The implications of our Catholic mission for your legal education are

many, and don't worry—I'm not going to explore them all in this short speech. I'm just going to identify one way in which I hope that you, as graduates of Notre Dame, will fulfill the promise of being a different kind of lawyer. And that is this: that you will always keep in mind that your legal career is but a means to an end, and as Father Jenkins told you this morning, that end is building the kingdom of God. You know the same law, are charged with maintaining the same ethical standards, and will be entering the same kinds of legal jobs as your peers across the country. But if you can keep in mind that your fundamental purpose in life is not to be a lawyer, but to know, love, and serve God, you truly will be a different kind of lawyer.

I think you will find, when you enter the legal profession, that most of your colleagues, by default or by design, treat the legal profession as an end in and of itself. Apart from family, which occasionally exercises a tempering influence, the law is the preeminent force driving the life of a typical lawyer. Legal opportunity is the primary consideration in choosing where to live. Ambition is the primary influence in choosing a job. The average lawyer gives his or her daily routine largely to work, from waking to sleeping. These things are true, by the way, whether the legal job is high paying or not. You have chosen a profession that engages your mind. While there is certainly some drudgery involved—no one likes document review—the practice of law is fun. Be prepared to love it. As a young lawyer, I was surprised by how much I did. It is easy to see how, for so many lawyers, the practice of law quickly becomes an end in itself, for the satisfaction, prestige, or money it brings.

Don't let that happen to you; set your sights higher than that. No matter how exciting any career is, what is it really worth if you don't make it part of a bigger life project to know, love, and serve the God who made you?

I'd like to offer three concrete suggestions for ways in which you might go about being a different kind of lawyer, one who treats his or her career as a means to the end of serving God rather than an end in itself.

First, before you take any job, particularly one that requires a move, pray about it. St. Ignatius of Loyola observed that when presented with options, most people choose what they want to do first, and it's only after the choice is already made that they go to God and say, "How can I serve You in the situation I'm in?" It's the rare person who consults God before making a choice. It's the rare person who brings his or her options to God and says, "In which situation can I best serve You?" Be the rare person. Pray about your career choices before you make them. If you



do, I think you will be successful at tempering the influence of ambition as the overriding force in your decisionmaking.

My second suggestion is that you give away 10 percent of what you earn to the church, charitable causes, and to friends and acquaintances who need it. Tithing will help you remember that your career and the money you earn shouldn't be directed just toward your own betterment but ought to be directed, in a tangible way, toward the common good. I recommend that you begin this practice with your first paycheck. As soon as I said that, I'm sure that many of you started worrying about your student loans. Don't. It's my experience that God is never outdone in generosity. For those of you who expect your salaries to increase over time, in some cases dramatically, it is also worth noting that in my experience, it is a lot easier to start this practice at the beginning of your career, when your paychecks are relatively small. Perhaps paradoxically, it wasn't really that hard for me to give away 10 percent of my income when I was a law clerk on government wages. It got a lot harder for me to write the checks when I went into private practice and the amount on them increased. But by then, the practice was a habit, so it was easier to stick with it.

Finally, when you arrive at your new jobs in your new cities, seek out friends with whom you can share your faith. For the past

three years, you have lived within the Notre Dame Law School community. While we are a community engaged in the enterprise of legal education and scholarship, we are also a community engaged in the enterprise of bringing about the kingdom of God. We are a community characterized by our love and concern for one another. I hope that you have enjoyed living here these last three years. I also hope that living at Notre Dame has given you a thirst for this kind of community. Don't just look back on your time here with nostalgia. When you get where you're going, carry Notre Dame with you. Deliberately choose a parish or church that has an active community life and commit yourself deeply to the relationships you find there. It's only when you're an independent operator that your career takes over. When your life is placed firmly within a web of relationships, it is much easier to keep your career in its proper place.

The advice I've given you today may sound challenging. But if you can rise to the challenge, I think you will find your career more satisfying as a result. The fulfillment at the end of your career will be immeasurably greater if it is a career marked by more than just cases won or deals done.

That's it. It has been a privilege to call you my students, and today, it is a privilege to call you my colleagues in the profession. Congratulations. I expect great things from all of you.