

Opening of the Law Year 26 July 2016

St Monica's Cathedral, Cairns

Address by Henry J

Welcome to our Opening of the 2016 Law Year inter-faith church service. I express the gratitude of the legal profession to the representatives and members of faiths and community institutions who this morning join us in marking this special event in the annual legal calendar.

The opening of the legal year church service dates back to the Middle Ages, when judges gathered in Westminster Abbey to pray for guidance for the year ahead. There and for many years in Australia the ceremony was held at the outset of the first superior court sittings of the calendar year. In deference to climatic demands the Antipodean version of the ceremony has for some decades been held in the middle of the calendar year.

Regardless of the time of year it is held, this service presents an annual opportunity for solemn reflection by members of our profession. It is an opportunity to reflect upon the timeless and righteous goal of the legal profession: the just and ethical administration of the rule of law. It is also an opportunity for each practitioner to pause and reflect upon the integrity and commitment of their manner of professional practice. It is apt that in now reflecting upon how we as individuals conduct our professional lives we do so in a place where worshippers reflect daily upon how they conduct their lives.

Further the act of holding this ceremony in a church is a fitting acknowledgement by our secular legal system of the valuable contribution which religions make in modulating and guiding human behaviour. That contribution, like that made by good parents and teachers, goes beyond essential rules of civilised behaviour such as

not killing and not stealing. It is a broader and subtler contribution, a contribution which shapes our moral compass against human frailties like pride, greed, rudeness and intolerance. In his book *Religion for Athiests*, philosopher Alain de Botton contrasted the law's less subtle, more limited contribution. He wrote:

“Consider, by contrast, how belatedly and how bluntly the modern state enters into our lives with its injunctions. It intervenes when it is already far too late, after we have picked up the gun, stolen the money, lied to the children or pushed our spouse out of the window. It does not study the large debt crimes owe to subtle abuses. The achievement of Judeao-Christian ethics was to encompass more than just the great and obvious vices of mankind. Its recommendations addressed a range of faint cruelties and ill-treatments of the sort that disfigure daily life and form the crucible for cataclysmic crimes. It knew that rudeness and emotional humiliation may be just as corrosive to a well functioning society as robbery and murder.”

Those insightful words are a humbling reality check against self-importance at this time of self-reflection for we lawyers – a reminder, as we embark upon this service, that we are not the only members of our community whose contributions to society promote its compliance with the rule of law.

On our profession's behalf I convey my sincere gratitude to Bishop Foley and his flock for hosting today's service in this spiritually contemplative and uplifting place and for the provision of their hospitality in the morning tea to follow. I also thank Judge Morzone and his assistants for their co-ordinating contribution to today's service. Finally I extend our thanks to St Mary's choir. Good will to all.
