Remarks of the Honorable Harry T. Edwards

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HARRY T. EDWARDS*

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Honored guests, distinguished alumni, members of the law faculty and student body, members of the Catholic University family, and other guests: It is a real honor for me to participate in this dedication ceremony to welcome the Columbus Law School community to its magnificent new home. What a glorious building! One cannot help but be excited on such an occasion, for the magnificence of this building is a tribute to the venerated mission of the legal profession.

Before you leave here today, look at the inscription on the library wing facing the campus. It reads: “Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” It is appropriately on the outside of the building, to be seen by any who would enter, as a reminder of what lawyers seek to do.

For those of you who have forgotten, the quotation is from chapter 6, verse 8 of Micah in the Old Testament. Micah was a prophet: that is spelled “p-r-o-p-h-e-t,” not “p-r-o-f-i-t.” I mention this because, in recent years, the profession has indulged too many lawyers who embrace an ideology of professional amorality. Many of these lawyers believe that money, not justice, is the mission of our profession; as a consequence, they have lost a sense of obligation to the courts, opponents, and the general public. This, in turn, has resulted in underrepresentation of the disadvantaged, inattention to public service, and, even, instances of unethical and illegal conduct. Worst of all, we have seen growing expressions of public mistrust of our profession and a belief by many that our systems of justice are not fair. “Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God” is an apt reminder for those who would stray from the principal mission of our profession.

Long ago, Justice Brandeis wrote extensively on the lawyer’s duty to serve the public good. His vision of the profession included what he called the “people’s lawyer.” What Brandeis meant to say, I think, is that the only way that lawyers’ disproportionate social and political power can be legitimate is if members of the bar cultivate professional public spiritedness. When lawyers dedicate their professional energies solely to serve private interests, they systematically use their influence to advance the ends of those who can purchase the greatest quantity of legal services.

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Because the wealthy are not the only citizens entitled to the advancement of their interests, a legal profession so constituted cannot be just. As Micah would say, we must “do justice.”

Another reason that we cannot be indifferent to the public good is the connection between our profession’s moral identity and our own individual moral identities. Affiliation with a professional group gives meaning to one’s life. It seems almost loathsome for a lawyer to embrace an ideology of indifference. By any account, we will be better persons if we define ourselves and are defined by others with reference to a commitment to promote the public good rather than with reference to a conviction that we enjoy some vocational exemption from ordinary norms of morality. We must do for others, not just for ourselves. Or, as Micah would say, “love mercy.”

The third lesson from Micah is: “walk humbly with your God.” Last week, the pastor at my church used this scripture in his sermon. I cannot do him justice, but he said something like this: Too often we demand our due, when really we should be thankful that God has spared us from getting what we really deserve. I remember thinking, what a wonderful lesson for lawyers! And I was reminded of another passage from the Old Testament, Psalm 116: “How shall I make a return to the Lord for all the good he has done for me?” If we strive to answer this question with concrete, good deeds in our work, we will “walk humbly with our God.”

For those of us in the legal profession, it is crucial to preserve our original understanding of what it means to be a lawyer. For, in recalling the ideals that brought us to law school, we will be reminded that law is an instrument of justice and that lawyers have a responsibility to understand and employ the law in pursuit of the public good. In short, we will never forget that serving clients and serving the public good are not mutually exclusive commitments.

This building symbolizes our aspirations. But what goes on in the building is more important than the building itself. I have no doubt that the faculty, students, and alumni of the Columbus School of Law will use this new site well, to continue to serve the community as they have in the past. This law school has excelled in every realm of its academic work and also has gained an outstanding reputation as a leader in clinical legal education and community service programs—programs aimed at reaching out to those who cannot pay for the legal services they need and at offering the school’s students both practical experience and exposure to the social good that the profession must provide. We are blessed to have the Columbus School of Law. It has earned this new home in which it will continue its good work.