

A Jesuit Lawyer

By Nate Romano, SJ

Nate Romano, SJ, pronouncing first vows in the Society of Jesus on August 14, 2010

“Why do you do this kind of work?”

The questioner was a university student discerning a Jesuit vocation. At the time, I was a Jesuit novice on “experiment,” working with immigrants and refugees in Milwaukee.

I had just explained what I was doing during my experiment – preparing and filing motions, briefs, and appeals; appearing with clients at immigration court, etc. A Jesuit doing such “non-Jesuit” work startled this discerner.

I am a lawyer. When legal professionals see the “SJ” after my name, they are often perplexed. Others I meet in more “traditional” Jesuit ministry settings often have similar reactions when they discover what I do.

So, why do I do this kind of work?

My experience as a lawyer prompted me to become a Jesuit. In college, I flirted with the idea of being a Jesuit priest. I fantasized about presiding at the Eucharist, attended “Come and See” events at the Jesuit novitiate, and met with the vocation director. Yet, after graduating, I moved on to law school. Strangely, once I was a lawyer, God intervened, rekindling my religious desire.

After graduating from law school, a few of us classmates opened a small firm. We were young and idealistic, convinced we could make things better. We took cases that put us in contact with people in need. Some of us, myself included, became “assigned counsels,” accepting referrals from public defenders and essentially representing those who could not afford a defense lawyer. Some of us took on family cases. One started defending individuals with mental illness, for

whom the government sought involuntary commitment.

These cases brought us into direct contact with people, many of whom were victims of distressing circumstances, entangled in a web of suffering, anger, and despair. Many were from broken families and suffered from addictions or mental illness. Many were victims of poverty and violence. Their actions typically led to arrest, conviction, probation, and jail, creating cycles of broken families and hurting communities.

As a Jesuit lawyer, I am a sign to the broader world that law is about justice and liberation.

I once received a call from the local county jail. I did not recognize the number but was curious and answered. It was a young man asking if I would represent him. After discussing his situation, I asked how he had found out about me. “You’re always here,” he said, “and you seemed different, so I asked them who you were.”

I had been visiting the prison frequently to check on my incarcerated clients. My standard practice was to start each conversation with a simple “How are you doing?” It seemed natural. Isn’t that how “civilized” people converse? I did not see any reason to skip etiquette just because I was meeting someone in prison. But what seemed simple to me was apparently not so simple to the inmates. Like this caller, they were not used to being treated like anything more than “an offender” in the justice system.

Experiences like this prompted me to desire more than being a lawyer.

I knew God was inviting me to a different way to approach my legal work. Our legal system impacts people’s lives. Unfortunately, the poor and marginalized usually suffer most in this process. The embers of my vocational desires – to be a priest and a Jesuit – were reignited, leading me to seek God more fervently and ask how I could best respond in faith, love, and service.

A major attraction to the Jesuits is that ministries are not limited in scope. In the Society, I could use skills I developed as a lawyer.

The oath of office for lawyers in Wisconsin concludes, “I will never reject, from any consideration personal to myself, the cause of the defenseless or oppressed, or delay any person’s cause for lucre or malice. So help me God.”

As a lawyer, I am called to ensure God’s justice serves everyone. As a Catholic, I am called to a “preferential option” for the poor. As a Jesuit, I am called to a faith that embraces justice. As a Jesuit lawyer, I am a sign to the broader world that law is about justice and liberation. A sign to my brothers and sisters in the Church that we cannot ignore apparently secular work. A sign to my clients that they are loved by a God who will never forsake or abandon them.

This is why I do what I do. ✠



Nate Romano, SJ, recently completed two years of service with the Creighton University School of Law clinics. He is presently studying at the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University in Berkeley, Calif.

Nothing in this article is intended as legal advice or an effort to solicit or otherwise establish an attorney-client relationship.