Good Evening,

My name is Joan Orie Melvin. I am a Justice on the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania.

I want to thank Fr. Thomas Dailey for personally inviting me here to celebrate with you during Heritage Week, which celebrates the educational legacy of St. Francis de Sales, the patron of DeSales University. It is a privilege to be here today to speak to you at this law and society seminar on the topic of “Keeping the Faith While Upholding the Law.”

I would like to give you some background information about myself. I grew up in a devout Catholic family with eight brothers and sisters in the North Hills of Pittsburgh. My parents instilled in us the importance of faith in our lives. Our faith is the cornerstone of our lives. Our parents raised us on the principles of God, country, and service. My parents lived their faith and walked in Christ’s light.

My mother was a nurse who gave up her nursing career to raise her nine children. She was very active and involved in our community. She smiles upon me from heaven today. My father was a family physician who practiced medicine for over 50 years. When he recently retired, his office visits were seven dollars, and he still made house calls. He encouraged everyone in our community, whether they were unemployed or laid off, to get the health care they needed for themselves and their families. He told them not to worry about paying him. The reason was when he grew up in the Polish Hill section of Pittsburgh, his mother had a lot of health problems and they could not afford good health care. So, as a doctor, he wanted to ensure that no one had to see their loved ones suffer without the appropriate health care. On his days off, which were Thursdays, he would take a handful of the Orie kids with him to the inner city schools and hospitals where again he would provide free healthcare to those who could not afford it. While he was caring for the loved ones, we were in the waiting room
playing with their family members, and we never thought there was anything different between us and them. Back then I thought my dad was my hero, because as busy as he was, he always spent time with his kids. But now that I am a parent and I have been blessed with six children of my own, I realize he wasn’t just spending time with his children, he was instilling values—values of giving back to the community and helping those less fortunate. Those are the values I will bring with me to the Supreme Court and those are the values that I share with all Pennsylvanians.

My parents instilled in me the importance of Catholic education. Following graduation from St. Alexis grade school, I attended Our Lady of Mercy Academy which was an all-girl Catholic high school. After graduation I attended college at the University of Notre Dame. I then went onto graduate school at Duquesne University School of Law. All of my education has been at Catholic schools.

Looking back, I remember the wonderful teachers and the great education I received. I recall being challenged by my teachers and my peers to do my best. I not only received a wonderful academic education, but I learned how to live a holy life through prayer and reflection. I learned the true meaning of what it means to “love one another” as well as love myself. My teachers instilled in me how important it was to follow the Ten Commandments, devote myself to the liturgy of the Word and live an inspired life. I also had the opportunity to engage in daily prayer, celebrate the sacraments, go to mass every Friday, form a Catholic community help others, and grow in the knowledge of Jesus.

At an early age, the nuns instilled in me the importance of the Saints. I would read about the lives of the Saints in order to enrich my own. Saint Francis de Sales said: “you will do well to choose for yourself some individual saint whose life especially to study and imitate.” I have found that throughout my life different saints reach out to me. It’s as though they knock on my door. Ever since I was a child, St. Jude has been by my side guiding me through many of life’s challenges. I named my youngest child after St. Jude to honor him. I also recognize that I am who I am today because of the religious foundation instilled in me during my years of Catholic education.

My parents as well as my teachers also encouraged me to participate in many volunteer activities. During my high school years, I volunteered as a Candy Striper at North Hills Passavant Hospital helping the sick. I also volunteered at a nursing home as well as the School for the Blind. While in college, I continued to volunteer tutoring poor children and working with the mentally retarded. In law school, I provided free legal assistance for those who could not afford it. Today, as a Judge, I still volunteer my time. I speak to students all over the Pittsburgh area about the law and Pennsylvania’s Court System. I also recently instituted a program with the Allegheny County Bar Association’s Young Lawyers Division aimed at
educating our young people about internet usage and cyber-bullying. I have been firmly committed to educating our youth in this area and always inform the students whom I speak with that just one instant message, text message, or posting can impact a student’s life forever. I have concerns that our young people are not aware of the consequences of their actions and are in need of guidance. I also serve on many boards and organizations in the community. I have always known that no matter what you decide to do with your life, you can always help others in some way.

Following graduation from law school, I practiced corporate law for a number of years. I then went into private practice specializing in civil litigation. Later, I was appointed by former Pittsburgh Mayor Richard Caligiuri to City of Pittsburgh Municipal Courts. I was the first female appointed Chief Magistrate of that Court. There, I carried the Gospel message that I was taught during my years of Catholic Education—respect the dignity of every individual and service to our community.

As Chief Magistrate, I started the first Domestic Violence Court in the nation in 1985. It was a court that was established to help families with serious problems get help they desperately needed. This was long before the public’s awareness was heightened as to the criminal nature of Domestic Violence. It was a very successful court, and it produced very low recidivism rates. It also served as an international model for the nation of Ireland, who used my Domestic Violence Court as a prototype when they finally addressed this problem 15 years after my innovative specialized court. I was also creative with community service program. I made juvenile offenders convicted of non-violent crimes perform community service to instill accountability. I had them work in soup-kitchens and emergency rooms, and clean up the city parks. Every one successfully completed the program.

I also expanded the community service into the Housing Court. Senior Citizens on fixed-incomes were cited by building inspectors for violating the code for cracked sidewalks or stairs in disrepair. These seniors could not afford to put their properties into compliance. On the other hand, there were contractors cited by the building inspectors for major violations. They had tens of thousands of dollars in fines. I asked the contractors if they were willing to provide labor and material to put the senior citizens properties into compliance in exchange for forgiving their substantial fines. They were eager to participate in this program. Of course, they had to abate their violations also. As a result, there was overall positive compliance with the city building code, and the city benefited. I refer to this as therapeutic jurisprudence. I credit my Catholic faith in serving others as inspiring me to be innovative as this grassroots level of the judiciary.
When I became a judge on the Court of Common Pleas of Allegheny County I heard all types of cases…criminal, family, and civil. I presided over thousands of trials and implemented justice by ensuring a fair and impartial process. Any attorney coming to my courtroom knew he or she was litigating on an even-playing field. In addition, all parties were treated with respect and courtesy.

As a trial judge, there are many difficult cases in which I presided. Two heart-rending criminal cases come to mind. One dealt with a drunk driving case which resulted in a death. A first year medical student came home for Christmas. He went to his dad’s bar to celebrate after having done well on his exams. He helped close the bar, and he and his father had had some drinks. The young man was driving his dad home when he had an accident that resulted in his dad’s death. Charges were filed against the medical student for vehicular homicide, which carried a mandatory minimum sentence of 3 years in a state penitentiary. His mother was mourning the loss of her husband, and was now losing her son too. As a judge, I knew if this young medical student had to serve three years in a state penitentiary, he would never go on to become a doctor, and it would be a loss to society. I tried to fashion a sentence that allowed him to finish medical school, and then be required to provide medical services to the poor for three years, which was the equivalent of his mandatory sentence. I wanted him to become a productive member of society. However, the District Attorney refused this creative sentence, and the law mandated the three year sentence be imposed.

The second case dealt with another vehicular death. In that case, a young man who had not been drinking reached down to change the radio station and was inattentive for a moment and struck a young 19 year old girl dressed in dark clothing late at night in a dimly lit area. The young man showed remorse throughout his jury trial, and you could tell that he was distraught over the loss of life. The young victim’s parents sat quietly throughout the trial. Unbeknownst to the jurors, I became aware that these parents had lost their older son two years prior when he was a victim of a drunk driving accident. These parents had only had two children and tragically lost both to car accidents. The jurors found the young man not guilty of committing a crime and felt it was more a negligence case belonging in civil court. The young man sobbed when the jury found him not guilty, and the most moving part of this trial was when the mother of the victim approached the driver and told him that she forgave him. It is during these types of difficult cases that I rely on and derive strength from my faith. Prayer grants me the fortitude to do my job. Saint Francis de Sales described prayer “as a healing water which causes the roots of our good desires to send forth fresh shoots, which washes away the soul’s imperfections, and allays the thirst of passion.”

As a judge on the Superior Court, I decided appeals which contained issues which touched upon every aspect of life…family matters such as child custody, support, divorce; criminal matters; matters involving wills and estates; property disputes; and those involving breach of
contract or personal injury. In making my rulings on over 8,000 appeals, I carried with me the
tenets and principles learned in my youth. I worked hard. I had pride in my job, and I served
others with dignity. It was God’s grace that I was able to make important decision every day. I
had faith in myself and in God’s goodness that I could continue this path.

Today, I am forever grateful and blessed to have the opportunity to serve on Pennsylvania’s
highest court as a Justice of the Supreme Court. I had previously run for a seat on the Supreme
Court in 2003 but was unsuccessful. As Saint Francis de Sales would say: “Never be in a hurry;
do everything quietly and in a calm spirit. Do not lose your inner peace for anything
whatsoever; even if your whole world seems upset.” So God had another plan and I was called
to run again in 2009, I prayed for God’s guidance and strength in order to persevere. I believed
that God had a plan for me. No stone was left unturned. I traveled through all 67 counties of
this great Commonwealth and listened to the concerns of the public.

One saint in particular, St. Padre Pio, guided me on my journeys which many times went late
into the night. During my first Supreme Court race in 2003, I was introduced to Padre Pio’s
influence. Padre Pio and I developed a special relationship, and he has influenced me and
fostered my spiritual life through prayer. He said, “Prayer is the best weapon we posses. It is
the key that opens the heart of God.” He also said, “Pray, pray to the Lord with me, because
the whole world needs prayer. And every day, when your heart especially feels the loneliness
of life, pray. Pray to the Lord, because even God needs our prayers.”

On difficult days, I would remember his words, “You must not be discouraged or let yourself
become dejected if your actions have not succeeded as perfectly as you intended. What do you
expect? We are made of clay and not every soil yield the fruits expected by the one who tills it.
But let us always humble ourselves and acknowledge that we are nothing if we lack the Divine
assistance.”

As a justice on the Supreme Court, I will continue to walk in my faith. I will continue to set a
good example for others and live a life of love and faith. I will try to focus on what bring
happiness to my life and the lives of others, and I will always be able to recognize right from
wrong and choose the right path. I intend to make a difference. We are given options everyday
in our lives. In making tough decisions we need to fall back on the religious and educational
foundation we have received.

Fr. Dailey and this University have now inspired me to look to another patron for guidance, St.
Francis de Sales. I told you how I named my youngest child after St. Jude. Well, she was
confirmed this past year, and as busy as I was on the campaign trail, I made it to her
confirmation and, providentially, the name she took was Frances. As a result of her
Confirmation, I began reading about your patron, who was a lawyer, a Doctor of the Church,
and a Bishop. His writings, especially, “The Introduction to the Devout Life,” and “Treatise on the Love of God,” were addressed to lay people to make them understand that we are all called to be saints. Saint Francis de Sales has reached out to me and I will now carry him with me as I continue the next chapter in my life and my judicial career.

I have a passion for bettering the Commonwealth. When I see something the court should be addressing, I am not shy in proposing creative solutions that may be out of the norm. I am proud to be a judge in touch with her community. I intend to continue to be innovative in educating the public about the importance of the judiciary. It is so important for judges to be connected to their communities. Judges should not be isolated away from the people in their ivory chambers. In the wake of unethical backroom deals, pay raises, public corruption, and scandals in the judiciary; these are very trying times in Pennsylvania. I ask you to please keep me in your prayers.

In closing, for all of you here today who are students, professors, clergy, and members of the bench and bar, never forget the importance of your spiritual life, your family, the need to respect and love others, the challenge to strive for excellence and give of yourself. Live by these values and you will be successful in life. Saint Francis de Sales said “be who you are, and be that well.”

Thank you and God bless you.