Bill Frank

New society of lawyers

A CATHOLIC-secular law combination, established in Europe about 650 years ago, has been revived in the Catholic Diocese of Wilmington. It's the recently organized St. Thomas More (1478-1535) Society of Delaware and the Eastern Shore, composed chiefly of about 100 Catholic jurists and lawyers but not restricted to Catholics.

As its first public contribution, the St. Thomas More Society is sponsoring what is known in Europe as "the Red Mass." It will be offered on Oct. 4 at 8 a.m. in St. Peter's Cathedral, Sixth and West streets, Wilmington, with a breakfast following in St. Peter's Social Hall.

It is called a Red Mass because the vestments worn by the clergy are red, symbolizing "the fire of the Holy Spirit," according to Geoffrey Gamble, a Du Pont Co. lawyer, who is the current president of the society.

For centuries, judges in Europe wore red robes while presiding in courts.

The Red Mass tradition has been observed in Paris and Rome for many hundreds of years at about the beginning of their respective judicial years.

Says Gamble: "Our St. Thomas More Society is a Catholic group of Delaware and Eastern Shore lawyers and jurists who seek to develop an appreciation of the relevance of Christian philosophy and values to the practice of law, to public service, and to contemporary society. Our group believes that the vocation of the Christian lawyer and jurist is to further the process of development by which the law responds to human needs. Although it is a Catholic society, it is not wholly a Catholic society. In fact, its membership is open to any faith."

Gamble further reported that several lawyers and jurists have announced their intention to attend the mass, including Chief Justice Andrew D. Christie, whose father was a Presbyterian minister.

Bishop Robert E. Mulvey of the Wilmington Diocese will be the celebrant at the mass, with the Rev. Robert Kennedy, associate professor of canon law at the Catholic University of America as the speaker. Father Kennedy, by the way, holds canon and civil law degrees.

The society is planning an annual dinner at which a St. Thomas More Award will be given to the public official and/or lawyer who has demonstrated outstanding courage and ethical behavior in the practice of his or her profession.

In England the Red Mass was particularly promoted by King Edward I who arranged to have it celebrated in Westminster Abbey. Following the Reformation, the Red Mass was discontinued for years. But it was revived in 1903 and has been continued in Westminster Cathedral ever since, even during World War II.

During the reign of King Louis IX (St. Louis) of France, La Sainte Chapelle in Paris was designated as the chapel for the Red Mass. In the 19th century, the building was restored from earlier damage and dedicated exclusively for the use of la Messe rouge.

The celebration of the mass was started in the United States in 1926 in New York City by the Guild of Catholic Lawyers whose invitation to attend was accepted by lawyers of all religions, members of law faculties and members of the New York bar. The mass was celebrated in Old St. Andrew's Church near the federal and state courts.

Certainly the establishment of the annual celebration of the Red Mass in Wilmington must add another welcome project that promotes friendship and mutual understanding among the various religions, races and nationalities. The founders of the St. Thomas More Society are to be highly applauded and blessed for their foresight.

-Bill Frank is a News-Journal columnist.