



SK David W. Studley, KGC
R.E. Grand Commander
 P.O. Box 298
 Mountain Ranch, CA 95246
Studleylaw66@gmail.com
 (209) 304-6950



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“And the Three Men I Admire Most
 The Father, Son and the Holy Ghost
 They Took the last Train to the Coast
 The Day the Music Died.”

Don McLean, *American Pie* (1971)

Fellow Sir Knights All: Don McLean’s tribute to Buddy Holly’s tragic 1959 death may best be remembered for its memorable verse, “Drove my Chevy to the levee but the levee was dry.” To many, however, it also decried the loss of innocence that marked the end of the 1950’s and the beginning of the 1960’s, when America’s bedrock values were questioned, and a growing cynicism sought to distance American life from its founding principles. Religious faith, particularly Christian teaching, was one of those values.

Recall the 1950’s. In Second Grade, I’m guessing 1954, I remember being taught to include the new phrase, “under God”, in the Pledge of Allegiance. Somehow that inclusion was seen as a rebuke of the perceived Communist threat to American ideals. We youngsters recited that Pledge at the beginning of each school day. But this upset some, who asked Courts to rule that a reference to God in an affirmation of national unity violated the “separation of church and state” standard that they wished were applied.

Our Constitution recognizes both the freedom to worship as one believes and forbids Congress from passing any law that mandates a particular religion as obligatory. The first freedom is considered an individual right; no government can by law restrict matters of conscience. The establishment clause, by comparison, is considered a restriction on government action. It invalidates state laws that seek to mandate a particular faith. Accordingly, our Supreme Court has reasoned *in dicta* that the Pledge is not invalid where there is no coercive effect associated its exercise. See, Justice Thomas’ concurrence in *Elk Grove Uni. Sch. Dist. v. Newdow*, 542 U.S. 1 (2004).

While the Pledge thus survives legal challenges, societal values regarding religion and public life seem to be progressing without regard to considered standards of social interaction. Advocates urge the removal of statues depicting Moses delivering the Ten Commandments, statues of religious leaders are desecrated or destroyed, churches are closed in the name of public health imperatives. Justifications vary but the common theme uniting these arguments springs from the same concept: there ought to be a repudiation of any public mention of religiously-inspired beliefs.

The consequence of this effort has made average citizens reluctant to mention religion for fear of violating some societal norm. The restraints of political correctness have fostered a growing secularization of public life. To many, the mere mention of Judeo-Christian virtues invokes worries of public ridicule; the most strident among us shout out their condemnation of Christianity as violating their belief that religion must be excised from public life. It seems as though the vocal few have silenced the many.

But it doesn’t need to be this way. The same First Amendment that protects free exercise of religion also protects the fundamental freedom to speak one’s mind. As a Christian organization, we all should do so. Don’t let those who yearn for an exclusively secular culture drown out those core values that formed our Country and preserve its character. Stand up proudly for our Christian beliefs. It is in this spirit that I have adopted my motto:

“Fear Not: Proclaim and Celebrate our Faith.”

Changing topics, allow me to introduce my appointees for the year. The Grand Sentinel is SK Efren Prado, a Past Commander of Siminoff Commandery #80. The Grand Warder is SK Jarrod Washington, KYCH, PC of Auburn Commandery #4. The Grand Sword Bearer is SK Bill Miklos, KYCH, PC of Auburn Commandery #4. Please welcome them to the Grand Family.

I am particularly pleased to introduce SK D. Michael Edwards as Grand Standard Bearer and my appointee to the progressive line. Mike is a Past Commander of Butte Commandery #5 stationed in Marysville. Mike worked as a High School teacher of history and literature for more than 20 years and owns and operates Sterling Numismatics, a rare coin business. A member of the Knight York Cross of Honor, Mike also serves the Masonic Lodge as Assistant Grand Lecturer and is active in DeMolay, Shrine and Eastern Star. He is a member of several York Rite invitational bodies. I know that Mike will serve the Grand Commandery with devotion and honor.