

Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church
Lake Worth, Florida

THE EVE OF THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS DAY

December 27, 2008

Canon Richard T. Nolan

THE LAST WORD:

Reflections on Four and A Half Decades of Ordained Ministry

Just over forty-five years ago (June, 1963) in the Diocese of Massachusetts, I was ordained a deacon, and two years later a priest. Tonight marks my complete retirement from ordained ministry, and this is, I presume, my last word from a pulpit. Oddly enough, I am well prepared for this transition. At any age health nuisances can modify our daily living, and in this regard, my withdrawal from ordained privileges is timely.

Although my primary profession was in private and public higher education, I am very fortunate to have served in a wider “composite career” as a writer and in an eclectic mix of ministries in New York, Connecticut, and in recent years here at St. Andrew’s. In all of these undertakings, I have discovered a common humanity with individuals and groups living in shades of darkness and Light. We are all on continuing expeditions that may include experiences that from time to time glow with joyful radiance and at other times are shadowy or even dreadfully dark.

My three decades of fulltime service in higher education necessitated sensitive and impartial clarifications of diverse philosophic and religious issues. At no time was my classroom used as a pulpit. In fact, the vast majority of my students had no clue whatsoever that I also had the role of a clergyman, or for that matter, that I am in any sense a Christian. As you may know, one of the objectives of undergraduate philosophy professors – regardless of a course’s specific focus – is to motivate, even provoke, students to think analytically and logically, emotions aside as much as possible. I was not in the classroom to nurture students in a particular faith or philosophy.

However, I am glad to say that within most Episcopal Church congregations, people are not expected to leave their brains at the door. Most clergy encourage “loving thoughtfulness” about life as Christian men and women – which from time to time is entirely compatible with secular views. Yet, I readily admit that I preach the Good News *as I comprehend it* and within very broad Episcopal Church parameters; in any case, I am not any prelate’s parrot or puppet. Even though I may stretch the Church’s “generous orthodoxy” in certain matters, the Episcopal faith community allows reasonable, loyal, informed exploration, and dissent. In addition, today’s Church welcomes scientific information once it is firmly established. We are a body that blends *preservation* and *pioneering* with their inevitable tensions. *I certainly could have fit nowhere else!*

Both 71 and born 3 days and 100 miles apart, my partner Bob and I are “cradle Episcopalians” – a label for those who are baptized and raised from infancy within Episcopal congregations. Fairly recently we even discovered that both of us began to serve as acolytes (in those days, “altar boys”) when we were 8. From the time we were 18, Bob has been at my side, and I at his – even when it was professionally necessary to live somewhat apart. In any case, as a psychotherapist-colleague once commented to me, “You are the kite soaring aloft in a hurricane, and Bob is your firm and steady anchor.” This metaphor is absolutely on target – although *these* days I certainly do not soar at all!

Out of line with many people’s expectations, our family life has always come *first* for both of us – of greater priority than our primary professions in education, and additionally for me, of greater priority than serving as an ordained minister. When we look at each other, we do not see our vocational roles and titles; instead, we see a unique “child of God” called, as are all human beings, to love and be loved as best we can;

we do not see “the other half” but a beloved, whole person who has chosen to live grounded within a great Abrahamic heritage.

During all of these years, we have experienced the sluggish advance of human rights and responsibilities in both church and state. Perhaps like some of you, in our circumstances (especially during the 1950s through the early 90s), we chose to live somewhat defensively, rather deceptively, selectively self-disclosed, and with each new step carefully designed - not only to *survive* as an employed family, but also to *win* to the extent we could!

It was a wonderful moment of Light in the 1980s when I could be self-disclosing to the Bishop of Connecticut; he and his successors, as well as the retired and current bishops of this diocese, have been very supportive of us. We realize that many dioceses, including others in Florida and many other states, would still exclude us from many or all ministries. Now, more happily public than we ever thought possible, we intend to go to our next June’s fiftieth class reunion at Trinity College in Connecticut; there we plan to marry legally on the very campus, where in 1955 our life in concert originated. In the marriage ceremony we intend to make our first actual vows to each other and thereby take as far as we can our relatively inconspicuous participation in the cultural progress concerned with human diversity and civil rights.

I must confess to you that I am prepared for this transition to a more complete retirement, not only for reasons of health, but also because I have no “unfinished business” in my vocational life. In the third grade I informed my teacher, a Dominican Sister, that I wanted to become a Dominican priest. My attraction to the Dominican Order was its commitment to preaching, teaching, sound scholarship, and, among ministries, the priest’s role in the Church’s sacramental life.

However, very early in my teens I realized that the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience required by Dominicans (Anglican or Roman) were *not* a divine match for me at any level. Fortunately, the Episcopal Church, which I had never seriously considered leaving, permitted composite ministries; however, it is each aspirant’s responsibility to prepare for ordination in addition to any other facets of his or her vocational roles. For me, it required 4 college years, 3 more of seminary studies, and the equivalent of 4 additional years of university graduate studies. I assure you that the ambitions of that third grade boy have been fulfilled with his enormous appreciation and sense of fulfillment. My decision to retire fully from ordained ministry was reached, as with all major choices, collaboratively and optimistically with Bob and also in consultation with our rector Fr. Rasmus. Indeed, it is time for my “last word” in this setting.

As children, Bob and I were very fortunate to have been exposed to *life affirming*, rather than guilt inducing, clergy and congregations. We were protected from the shadows of superstition, magic, hyperbole, rigid legalism, simplistic Christianity, and liturgical excess. We never felt censured about sexual matters, because in our New England homes, churches, and schools such issues were rarely mentioned. Nonetheless, psychological and legal oppression was an ongoing threat from the broader culture strongly influenced by murky religious beliefs, severe gender traditions, and many forms of psychology (in recent decades, generally an ally).

It is a sad, hideous reality that those ill-practiced, formalized religions, certain “spiritualities,” laws, and views laden with gloomy and perverse narrow-mindedness, have been (and continue to be) among the chief, sinister oppressors of their dehumanized human targets-of-the-day (or millennium)! Had we not been nurtured in families and faith communities that stimulated *Light* rather than darkness, had we not *studied* our tradition (as well as others) with learned professors, I suspect that early on we would have gladly rejected all religions and spiritualities; we would have experienced them as our enemies lacking in credibility. We naively took for granted our liberating Anglican/ Episcopal tradition of “agreeing to differ” while experiencing unity in corporate worship. Sadly, we quickly came to realize that many religious and secular “schools of thought” and associations do *not* promote an “agreement to differ” and, in their

murkiness, are frequently destructive of the human spirit - thereby casting their adherents into emotional and intellectual prisons.

For us, the very foundation of our victory-still-in-progress is inherent in tonight's reading from the Gospel according to John. This wonderful language conveys its meanings within the beautiful mythologies and wondrous events of the first Christmas. If we interpret this passage within a Semitic (rather than a Greek philosophical) context we discover a wondrous proclamation. Briefly and perhaps too simply stated: in the course of time, about two thousand years ago, the Creator's purpose for all human beings, poetically speaking God's very *Word*, was personified in Jesus. In the New Testament portraits of his life and ministry, we witness the glory of God's Light and plan for us all. We do not need to look any further for God's common plan for our individual lives! For two millennia, we Christians have confessed that Jesus the Christ is the unique, exemplary image of God, like a son who has uniquely disclosed his Father's personal and active Will of love.

For Bob and me, this Word, this anchor, will continue to ground us as we continue to cherish each day "in sickness and in health." Tonight may be *my* "last word," but the most significant first and last Word for us all is evident in the One whose birth we celebrate this Christmas Season. Through God's own Word, I pray that we all receive the abiding Light and life of love, comfort, joy, and peace as well as the strength to cope with shadows and darkness, now and always. Amen!