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CONVENTIONS I HAVE KNOWN

The human condition is really quite funny. Even in the church, and it seems particularly in the Episcopal Church, the humorous moments of the human condition seem to pop up at the most unexpected moments.

This is especially true of us. We ourselves know that St. John's is a peculiar parish. Nobody need tell us that. And that truth reveals itself nowhere more distinctly than with the annual event of the Diocesan Convention.

There are a number of funny moments that stick out in my memory. I remember them fondly, and with a grin and a chuckle every time I think of them.

Like the time on the way to a convention in Augusta. I was riding with Father Ralston in the latest version of his Mercedes which he bought as part of his Lenten discipline every couple of years.

He was not in a good mood. He never was when we were headed for the convention. "I don't want to do this!" he would say, and groan. "But we will see our friends and enjoy their company" he would say as if to console himself. "You know Michael; it is not that they use the new book. You look more at this from a theological viewpoint than I do. For me it is aesthetic. It is all just so banal and boring," he continued.

Well about that moment as I felt a good conversation about theology and poetry coming on, there was a bright flash of light behind us. Then there was a whoop of a short siren and we discovered a Georgia State Patrol Officer behind us. I could not understand what this was all about because William never would speed. I encouraged him many times to see "what this Mercedes can do." And he would not.

Fr. Ralston pulled over to the side of the road and the officer, now walking, moved toward the driver side of the car. Well, before he could question us from the superior position of peering down into the car, William was up and out. "I sure am glad to see fine young men like you looking after old men like me!" he roared. "Father," said the patrolman, he knew that this large roaring figure was a priest because of his clerical collar, "you were following that car a little too close." Which was true, but which I was accustomed to when riding with William. "Oh me, I suppose I was" Fr. Ralston replied. "We are just

now headed up to our annual diocesan convention, and Fr. Carreker and I don't want to go, but we are going so we can get along with the rest of the church. I guess I wasn't paying as close attention as I should have been. I'll do better." "I am active in my church too," said the patrolman, "a deacon in the Baptist Church. Churches can sometimes be strange places." "Can they ever!" William echoed. And with this the patrolman, seeing that he had encountered a kindred spirit, albeit in a clerical collar and a Mercedes Benz, said, "Well, sir, your church needs you, so please be careful on the rest of your drive." And William responded, now in a low and sweet tone, "I promise I will be, and thank you for stopping me and looking after restless souls like mine." They exchanged blessings, and Fr. Ralston made his way back into the car, put on his sun glasses, and remarked, "Now that's a nice young boy. A deacon in the Baptist church. Handsome too." I could not help but burst into laughter. And he responded summarily, and with a grin, "I know, I'm bad."

Another such moment at diocesan convention came at Jekyll Island. Fr. Ralston and I had opted out of an afternoon service of Holy Communion, having some idea of the service that would be used and thought it better not to participate because all we would do would be uncharitable. We were waiting to go to have a nice dinner with our delegation.

As providence would have it, Roland Williams was there, serving for the first time as Chancellor of the Diocese under Bishop Shipps. It was Roland's first of twelve conventions, in which he would give his time and expertise to the diocese as chancellor, a position he served conscientiously and with honor. Well, this was also his first Rite II Eucharist.

We were ready to go eat and waited happily for Roland when he appeared, visibly unsettled. He was white as a sheet. His hands were shaking, and he looked at us in disbelief. "I've never been to a Rite II Eucharist before," he said. "It was awful!" By which he did not mean full of divine mystery, but just the opposite, full of mundane clamor. "They had guitars and praise music!?" he declared and asked all at once, again in total disbelief. "And people were raising their hands and jumping up and down. I have never seen anything like it." And you could tell Roland was dead serious, his eyes were large and his face long and he appeared as one might after having seen a ghost. William glanced at me with a knowing and kind smile. He felt for Roland but he was proud of the fact that Roland's liturgical sensibility was sound. "Let's go to dinner." William said. "Let's have a drink!" Our evening was spent over several martinis and in reflection on the state of the church. Roland had been visibly shaken. It took the evening to bring him around. And from that moment on, iron entered into his soul.

Perhaps one of the funniest moments at a diocesan convention was an exchange between Margaret and Mildred. It was the evening of the Bishop's address, and we had all squeezed, literally squeezed, into George Fawcett's suburban, and made it to the service just in time.

Margaret had spent much of her time in the Presbyterian Church and so liturgy and pomp and circumstance were a bit new to her. It all happened during the long procession. There was a young man, somewhat round and balding, carrying a wand, leading the procession. He was serving in the long and venerable line of vergers, those given

the task to put everyone in place and keep all things decently and in order.

As the procession was moving slowly down the nave of the church, Margaret turned to Mildred and said, "What is he?" And Mildred, amidst the loud singing of "Lift High the Cross" whispered, "He's the verger." To which, with furrowed brow, Margaret replied, "How did you know?" And Mildred, with equally furrowed brow asked, "Know what?" And Margaret said in a somewhat louder voice, "How did you know he is a virgin?" At which point Mildred bowed her head into her hymnal and began to laugh. And having caught the last part of this, a ripple of laughter moved along the rest of the pew of St. John's delegation. Just as the hymn ended, Mildred, mortified, turned to Margaret and whispered. "Not virgin, verger!" "Oh!" said Margaret, blushing. And then she replied, blushing and smiling as just Margaret can, "What's a verger?"

Only at St. John's.

The Rev'd. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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