

PART TWO

My desire for our federal chaplains is, in the words of John, “that Christ’s joy will be in them, and that their joy will be complete.” However, when they are at odds with colleagues or supervisors, it is hard to be joyful. How can the Bishop Suffragan minister to chaplains in conflicted situations?

Again I refer to the past to help me with the future. I once found myself assigned to a chaplain supervisor who despised me, not for anything I’d done, but simply because of who I was. He freely admitted this to be true. Bishop George Packard learned of my plight and intervened pastorally. He chose not to throw around the weight of his status as a military endorser. Instead he, along with Brooke and Clara, visited my somewhat remote location and ministered to our chapel staff. After counseling, Bishop George invited me to say the Reconciliation Office with him. Then, instead of giving me perfunctory absolution, he suggested that I wait because, in his opinion, I was not yet ready receive it. What an insight! I was indeed too conflicted to receive God’s forgiveness or to share it with my supervisor. Words cannot describe the peace I felt following Bishop George’s well-timed visit. Remarkably it changed the supervisor’s behavior as well.

This is an excellent ministry model for helping our chaplains in difficult situations. They need to understand that, due to diversity, conflict will be inherent in our federal ministry settings. Also, conflict is not necessarily bad; good things can be born from it. At the end of the day, all human conflict can be resolved. While the bishop cannot possibly visit every chaplain who is in trouble, he or she can, and needs to, minister to that chaplain’s situation. (I recall another time, when Bishop George was elsewhere in the world, he asked me to assist a fellow chaplain on his behalf.) No matter how it’s done, pastoral intervention can be helpful to all concerned.

I had a memorable turn at conflict resolution when I was an installation chaplain. The base commander had given me strict instructions to refer to the base tree as a “holiday tree” so as not to offend non-Christians. My insistence that a Christmas tree is not a Christian but a secular symbol fell on deaf ears. The commander insisted; so, holiday tree it was. Unfortunately, one of my more evangelical chaplains considered this decision an affront to Christianity and, before I knew it, waged a very public and hurtful campaign against the commander and me.

These were my options. I could have ignored the situation and hope that it would pass. Or, I could have punished the chaplain for insubordination. Instead, following Bishop George’s example, I sought the Lord’s guidance. I then assumed the role of mediator and returned to the commander with a recommendation that we compromise. I also counseled the chaplain on the

consequences of his actions. Then, I called my entire staff together and we devised a “damage control” strategy that worked.

Let me outline some pastoral tools I could use to help conflicted chaplains. First, because I believe the secret to a life well lived is deep self-knowledge and a strong sense of identity, I would always advise chaplains to be true to themselves as persons, priests and chaplains. Secondly, because I believe good ministry is based on healthy relationships, I’d like to take the time to get to know all chaplains and their families, so that when trouble comes I’m not ministering with strangers. Thirdly, because I’m convinced conflicts among our federal chaplains are most often theological, I would do some concrete teaching, and put out concrete guidance, regarding the unique role of Episcopal chaplains. Fourthly, as I indicated earlier, I’d insure that I (and my staff members) have the best possible training in group dynamics and conflict resolution. Finally, since all federal chaplaincies have some version of a “chain of command or authority,” I’d take care not to hurt the chaplain unintentionally by violating proper protocol for redressing grievances. I think our chaplains should be commissioned with Jesus’ words to the twelve, “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; therefore be as wise as serpents and as gentle as doves.” (Matthew 10:16)

The personal examples I’ve used reflect the reality of federal chaplaincy on the front lines. Conflicts abound. Problems and solutions are usually unclear. Resolution is hard work. But a wise mediator can “respect the dignity of every person” involved (Baptismal vows), and search for common ground. Inevitably charity will prevail. Old Bishop Richard Martin (retired, of Long Island, now in his 90s) loves to tell the story of a couple, long-married, who boasted to him that they had never had a conflict; to which the bishop replied, “then you will never know the joy of forgiveness!”