***“There “Was” a Lad Here.”***

***“All human life is sacred…”***

In 1996, the well-known, Very Rev. David B. Collins, former Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip in Atlanta Georgia, then the largest parish in the Episcopal Church, wrote a book entitled, “*There is a Lad Here.”* His well-considered title, of course, is to be found in the Feeding of the Five Thousand, as St. Andrew noted and presented a young man who had in his hands that which Jesus would use to feed the hungry. While being well known as an incredible priest, and remarkable Atlanta Braves Chaplain (I must add) he served as President of the House of Deputies of the Episcopal Church in some of the most complex times in Episcopal Church history - the mid to late 1970’s and 1980’s: radical innovations that would forever change the nature and character of the Church into which he (and I) were born.

I am not at liberty to say all that I would wish, because I was taken into the confidence of people who were in key positions of Church leadership who occasionally found a young priest to be one with whom they could confide. I am deeply indebted to Dean Collins and to a later President of the House of Deputies, Dean George L. W. Werner, for mentoring me, from the time I first served at a young age as a Deputy to General Convention, eventually from two different Dioceses, to later as a baby Bishop in the “junior House,” “The House of Bishops.”

I was absolutely amazed by both men’s graciousness, but I will forever remember the leadership of Dean Collins as he objectively listened to various attempts of deputies to speak theology, pseudo-psychology and socio-political concepts. In virtually every encounter, Dean Collins modelled what we termed in those days, “a loyal churchman.” He was God’s man, but he respected the Church as the Body of Christ, and as was demonstrated in his parochial life and in his later renewal ministry, of which I was humbled to be a part, he never did anything that was egocentric. He was truly Christocentric.

Moreover, at the General Convention, when he sat “in the chair” one would had to have known him well to know what his personal opinion was on a variety of subjects. He was not a man without an opinion, but he was a man who did not manipulate systems by exercising a revisionist mode of defending the Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church. He was more than just a casual “veteran” of General Conventions, because he was the son of the Rev. Charles F. Collins, a veteran Deputy to General Convention. Dean Collins went to his first General Convention in 1928 when he was 6 years old, and as the saying goes, “the rest is history.” When he was fourteen-years-old, however, he discovered official papers that made it clear: he had been adopted by Father and Mrs. Collins. Suddenly all that he had claimed as his own was called into question. Of course, his love for his parents was great, and not for a moment did he doubt his adoptive parents’ love for him. They WERE his parents.

Years later, however, when Dean Collins was the President of the House of Deputies during a long and emotional hearing regarding the sanctity of life, Dean Collins did something that changed the entire tenor of debate. He stepped away from the Chair, he asked the Vice-Chair to assume the Chair, and he stood before the Assembly simply as “David Collins, Clerical Deputy from Georgia.” Some there that day had known his father. Some there that day knew that David Collins grew up at General Conventions, but very few knew that the Very Reverend David B. Collins was adopted. Before he spoke, a Clerical Deputy said to the Assembly, “We are all grateful to this House for the manner in which our President has been leading us throughout this Convention. But you may not be aware the he is the unwanted child of a sixteen-year-old single mother. Had there been in 1922 the overwhelming number of abortions that there were in 1987, he believes he probably would not be here.” Dean Collins then opened his mouth, and with amazing humility and charity spoke of being adopted, of having been given by a woman to a couple who desperately wanted to have a child. Dean Collins needed to say very little. With his infectious smile and Godly presence, what he said was nothing other than giving glory to God that he was born. The eventual minority report which is now long eclipsed said in part, “All human life is sacred; hence it is sacred from its inception until death….”

As I write this, I see the generous words of my friend written in his hand in the front of his book,

“To Keith Ackerman. True Father in God. David B. Collins. Feast of St. Cyprian, September 13, 1996.”

The Christian world in general, and specifically Christianity in the United States has been blessed by the unwanted child, claimed by a loving family, and shared with a broken world.

*“There was a lad here.”*