

As I Recall...Chaplain John O'Connor

In 1975, when I was senior chaplain at the Naval Training Center in Orlando, Florida, John O'Connor was selected for rear admiral and went in as the Navy's Chief of Chaplains. John was the kind of individual who always had gotten things done, and so he came into Washington like a storm.

I was very happy to still be in Orlando, but I knew I was coming up for orders. The new Chief of Chaplains called and asked me if I would be willing to come to the staff in Washington. I had never gotten a call from anybody before asking me if I wanted to do anything. And not having served directly with John O'Connor, but having known John over the years, I wasn't so sure that I was the right guy for his staff.

John and I had had several debates in which we were on opposite ends of the spectrum. We were somewhat opposite on the Vietnam War, and we had been opposite on other things down through the years. (That could have been why he wanted me.) He had written a book called *A Chaplain Looks at Vietnam*, which I felt was very much to the disadvantage of the Chaplain Corps. His view at that time was a strong justification for the war in Vietnam, and I found it very hard to justify the war in Vietnam.

John came into town and said, "We've got to do something about the Chaplain Corps and the POM [Program Objectives Memorandum]. We've got to get the Chaplain Corps to be a part of the Navy system."

Those of us who were the so-called "young Turks" were very frustrated with the position of the Chaplain Corps. The atmosphere regarding the Chaplain Corps was largely paternalistic. The Chief of Chaplains was in the Bureau of Naval Personnel, which said, "Just don't worry. The Chief of Naval Personnel will take care of you guys." The Chief of Chaplains' staff was dominated by the detailing desk, and the detailing desk handled both personnel and manpower. You had the same individual charged with, as it were, manipulating billets and orders. John O'Connor had a much larger vision, as he's always had, of the Chaplain Corps' position and of the place of religion in Navy life. And he was not hesitant to express those views.

Chaplain O'Connor was the guy who was turning the Chaplain Corps upside down at a time it needed to be turned upside down. He had only four years to do it, and he wanted all these things done. I don't know what the record is of the numbers of people who served the Chief of Chaplains' staff, but I would dare say John O'Connor had the record.

I went to work on the Chief of Chaplains' staff on 6 August 1976, and I wasn't too happy about it. I was also somewhat

frightened, because it was only when I reported in and talked to Chaplain Jerry Sargent, who was division director, and then the Chief of Chaplains at length that I felt that their expectations about what I could contribute to the staff were beyond my capability. They seemed to identify an awful lot of worms. John O'Connor had stirred things up, and the loose ends were just going in 50 directions. And those first couple of weeks just seemed absolutely horrible. We were just working all day and into the night, just trying to get a handle on how big a mess we had. But I think one of the strengths of Chaplain O'Connor was that he was willing to see in other people the talent and abilities that they had. He was a character larger than life. He could get more out of you than you thought you could deliver. Some days he would have you the happiest guy in the world, and some days he would have you the angriest guy in the world, but the production would tell.

John O'Connor had said to me that he wanted the Chaplain Corps within the POM within my tour of duty there in three years. It was a time of a lot of ups and downs. One of the things that Chaplain O'Connor insisted on was that in order to be part of the system, every element of the staff needed to be involved in the committee meetings and all the things that were going on within the Bureau of Naval Personnel. So you're talking about a lot of man-hours.

Chaplain O'Connor knew the Navy system, and he was like a bulldog. He wouldn't let go. They would say something to him like, "Well, if you'll submit a letter." He'd say, "No, no. Letters come up and get turned down all the time. I want in on the meeting. I want my chair around the conference table."

There was a significant help we had in all the changes we were trying to make. Everybody knew that Vice Admiral Jim Watkins, who was Chief of Naval Personnel, was a very close friend of John. There was a great mutual admiration between Chaplain O'Connor and Admiral Watkins. So the environment was helpful, and I guess I was the one that developed this expression, which is one I've used with chaplains ever since, "paternalism with homework." In other words, you're not going to get more than anybody else, but if you do have a daddy and you do your homework like everybody else, or better than anybody else, you're going to get a hearing. And if you've got a hearing, at least you're working the system. You're not going up there looking for a handout; you have to prove that you can do it.

I think John O'Connor probably related more on a one-to-one with line admirals than other Chiefs of Chaplains had, willing to challenge their thinking at staff meetings, willing to go to all the meetings, certainly willing to posture himself as an equal, rather than a "staffie." So I think all those things

were of benefit. When John traveled, I think people were aware of the fact that John had access to people in the Washington area and that he was willing to speak up when he thought something was wrong somewhere or needed to be done better, so forth and so on.

The front office also is in a position of relating to, as John O'Connor would call them, the senior decision-makers of the Navy with a moral impact. The moral impact of that day would be that John O'Connor's voice parroted or emulated or motivated, maybe—I don't know—the voice of the Chief of Naval Personnel regarding the Navy and minorities, and the involvement in the Navy with minorities and what needed to be done within the Navy not just to recruit minorities, but to have open sessions throughout the whole Navy on race relations, and seminars and all these kinds of things. John O'Connor was there. We also dealt within the Chaplain Corps concerning the subject of alcoholism. We dealt openly with the concern of chaplains with alcoholic problems.

Now let me say something about his working style. John O'Connor would stand up and make a speech about how he was not a workaholic, but he was. If he was not a workaholic, then he was the most dedicated individual I had ever been around. There's no way any of us could keep the hours that he kept. He was always the first one there in the morning, the last one to leave at night. And he always claimed that he

was not doing that to put any pressure on any of the rest of us, but when the senior guy comes in at 0500 and goes home at 2100, it does put pressure on the rest of us. We used to tease in the office that if he got a good night's sleep, he would feel guilty about it and he'd give us all a hard time all day long. Whereas if he only got three or four hours' sleep, he was in a good mood and we were going strong.

One of the great gifts that John O'Connor had in his lifetime was his ability to write. His intellectual gifts were proven in his ability to get his Ph.D. from Georgetown. He was a fast read. He was an easy person to brief if you were briefing factual-type things. If you were briefing him on personnel moves and things, it got a little more difficult, because he had a tendency not to appear to be active in his decision-making, but rather he wanted to have you come up with what he already had thought.

I remember one silly thing. He wrote an esoteric letter to all the Catholic priests as priests, then a similar letter to all the rabbis as rabbis, and finally one to the Protestants as Protestants. Since I was, as they used to occasionally say, the token Protestant on the staff, he asked me one night to look it over, this letter he had written to all the Protestants. It was a good letter. It was a very flowery type of thing. He also liked long letters, and I liked short letters, and that used to lead to controversy.

I think one letter I rewrote seven, eight times—getting it larger and larger and larger. Bottom line was that he didn't like the letter because the letter said no to the request, and I had written my kind of letter, which was a letter that said, "No!" I needed to write his kind of letter, which said, "We have considered what you have proposed. It certainly has great merit. We admire the fact that your brain thinks these things up, but no." So he was far more gracious than I in those kinds of replies, but the answer was the same—"No!"

In this particular letter to Protestants, he had written that the Protestant chaplain's wife—I think the expression he used—is the chaplain's daily bread and so forth. I went in the next day at a staff meeting, and I critiqued the letter. He was very unhappy with my critique, because I said, "This is a bunch of romantic nonsense, a woman-on-the-pedestal type of thing. You must have seen some old movie in which the minister's wife was a saint. They are wives and they are not unlike other wives. The husband's ordination does not come with marriage for them," and so forth.

I came from a school where one's profession is to be divided from one's family. One's family is not expected to fall into a bunch of categories just because you happen to marry somebody of that profession. I still think that's very important.

But John did not feel that way about it. So he challenged me

by saying, "When you met Diane, did you not think of her in terms of what a wonderful minister's wife she would be?" I indicated to him that when I first met Diane, when we were both in college together, my reaction was, "Wow!" and had nothing whatsoever to do with the ministry! And I was dismissed from his office in no uncertain terms.