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The Reverend Canon Richard A. Norris, Jr. 1930–2005

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When Richard A. Norris died in April 2005, the church lost an excellent theologian, a fine preacher, and a superb teacher. Many of us lost a good friend as well, for Dick had a great capacity for making and maintaining friendships. Born in Washington, D.C., in 1930, Dick was a graduate of St. Alban's School. From there he went to Haverford College, where he obtained his B.A. degree in 1952. He then attended

419

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Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar. Returning from England with a B.A. (Oxon.), which in time became an M.A., he enrolled in The General Theological Seminary in New York City in 1954. Because of work already done and by dint of taking thirteen courses—a heavy course load, even for Norris (I, a lowly junior at the Seminary, had the room next to his but rarely saw him when he wasn't working)—he completed in one year the necessary course work for his S.T.B. He was made a deacon by Agnus Dun, then the Bishop of Washington, a person for whom he had the deepest respect. The very last time I saw Dick, Bishop Dun's virtues came up in our conversation.

After obtaining his S.T.B., Norris was invited to stay on at General as a fellow and tutor. In those days a tutor met his students either individually or in groups of two once a week to listen to and discuss a paper assigned to the student by the tutor. At the same time, as a fellow he worked on an advanced degree. In his first year as fellow and tutor Norris was ordained to the priesthood. In addition to his duties at General, Norris also assisted at the Church of St. Ignatius of Antioch in Manhattan, and served as an Assistant Chaplain at Columbia University under John Krum, later the Bishop of Southern Ohio, whom he described as his “mentor and counselor.”¹ After receiving his S.T.M. in 1957 he returned to Oxford to work on a D.Phil. degree. While there he assisted at the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin, and was made a Reader in Theology at St. John's College.

He returned from England in 1959 to take a position at the Philadelphia Divinity School. He was originally hired as an instructor of Greek, but before he arrived the seminary lost the person who had been teaching church history, and Norris became his replacement. Of this event he wrote, “So are careers undertaken: suddenly I was a Church historian.” He remained at the Philadelphia Divinity School until 1970, becoming successively Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, and Professor of Church History. In his last six years in Philadelphia he also served as Lecturer in Religious Thought at the University of Pennsylvania.

In 1970 Norris returned to The General Seminary as Professor of Dogmatic Theology, later becoming the Charles Lewis Gompf Professor of Historical Theology. It was at this time that he began to be involved in ecumenism. He served for fourteen years on the Theological

¹ All quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from a biographical sketch which Richard Norris prepared for fellow classmates at General in 2000.

Commission of the Consultation on Church Union (COCU). In commenting on those years with COCU he wrote, "I went into it with great enthusiasm and even hope; but in the end I came to feel not just that I disagreed with this or that aspect of the proposals doctrinal or organizational, but more, that the issues had not been explored deeply enough to make agreements real and disagreements fruitful." More fruitful, Norris felt, was his time with the International Anglican Reformed Consultation, where, as he put it, "the discussions (and arguments) were honest, and they actually got somewhere: minds changed—and even met." Other ecumenical enterprises with which he did some work were the International Anglican-Orthodox Consultation, LED III, and the International Lutheran-Anglican Consultation.

It was while Norris was teaching at General that I experienced first-hand his brilliance in the classroom. We had decided there was a need for a course on biblical interpretation as it has been practiced through the centuries—how the Bible was read and why it was read in a particular way—and we decided we should teach it together. I was constantly impressed with his ability to explain the most complicated material with skill and clarity. Recently, an alumna who had been in one of those classes described how she had noticed that when he was explaining something he always stayed with the point until he was certain that everyone had grasped it (and the "everyone" often included his co-instructor).

In 1978 Norris left The General Seminary to become the successor to Cyril Richardson as Professor of Church History at Union Theological Seminary, where he served until his retirement in 1995. As a professor at Union he not only taught undergraduate courses in patristics, his primary area of specialization, but courses in other areas, such as liturgics. He also supervised a number of doctoral dissertations. Then there was the year when Union was without an Academic Dean and he agreed to serve in that position. After a new dean was hired he returned thankfully to what he called "the real business of the place," scholarship and teaching.

When he moved up to Union, he also returned to the Church of St. Ignatius of Antioch, where he functioned as an associate priest, preaching and celebrating regularly. When the church was between rectors, Norris was a member of a team of three priests who ran the parish. It was also while he was at Union that he served for nine years as a member of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission. He delighted in the "interesting meetings which manifested

unashamedly the diversity of the Anglican Communion.” It was his participation in this commission that got him invited to be a theological consultant on dogmatic and pastoral issues at the Lambeth Conference of Bishops in 1988. He was also appointed Canon Theologian to the Bishop of New York.

In his retirement Norris remained active in the work of the church, teaching courses at The General Theological Seminary, Yale Divinity School, Union Seminary, and the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception, the seminary of the Roman Catholic dioceses of Brooklyn and Rockville Center. In addition he taught in the training program for deacons of the Diocese of New Jersey, for which he also prepared a short primer of basic theology. He continued his association with St. Ignatius Church. Another association that he maintained over the years and where he continued to serve was the Community of the Holy Spirit, for whose sisters he regularly celebrated the Eucharist.

As a scholar Norris produced many books and articles, a small representative sample of which can be found in the bibliography at the conclusion of this memoir. In addition to his published work and papers for learned societies (he was a member of the North American Patristic Society and the American Society of Church History, as well as member and past president of the American Theological Society), he wrote many papers in response to requests for information on such issues as the character of the episcopate. He also served for fourteen years on the editorial board of the journal *Church History*. Among his honors were an American Theological Society Faculty Fellowship, and honorary degrees from both Virginia Theological Seminary and The General Theological Seminary.

I remember in particular one sermon that I heard Norris preach. It was on a text from the fifth chapter of Second Kings, in which the prophet Elisha tells the Syrian Naaman that, if he wishes to be cured of his leprosy, he should go and bathe in the River Jordan. Norris read out his text—“Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?” (2 Kings 5:12)—and he began the sermon by saying, “Doubtless they are.” He then went on to make the point that when God calls you to a task, you don’t spend your time suggesting that God might find a better way to get the job done. You just go and do it. The Reverend Canon Richard A. Norris, Jr., I believe, practiced what he preached.

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