

## The Teacher of a Lifetime

February 24, 2003

Edward S. Gleason

Charlie is, was, and assuredly will always be my most important teacher. He influenced what I learned, why I learned, and why I continue to learn. Good fortune and some careful planning made it possible to take every one of the eight courses he offered during my three years in seminary. No one is perfect, but Charlie embodied the height and depth and beauty, the joy and the pain of everything he knew and believed. A teacher of profound ability, he modeled what he proclaimed.

Charlie's doctoral degree was in Old Testament. His faculty appointment was Theology, but he also taught Christian thought, homiletics, and music. He lectured with vigor and compassion, frequently embodying the person of whom he spoke, until he broke from role, walked down off the podium, and stood directly in front of the class to speak as Charles Price.

Tertullian was his topic the first time I remember he did this. Standing directly in front of us, looking deadly serious, he shook a commendatory finger and said, "Remember Tertullian. Remember Tertullian. Once upon a time, a very long time ago, Tertullian had a bright idea, an original idea. It's called the Trinity. "Remember that. Someday, you too might have a bright idea."

Lecturing on the Psalms, he came to Psalm 103. "As for mortals, their years are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more."

Down from the podium, finger aloft, moving rapidly. "You remember that," he said. Remember that. And if you ever doubt it, you come back here, you come back in only five years, five short years, and just see if anyone even remembers your name."

Of course, when we did return in five years, or whenever, far later, there was always one person who did remember our name – and everything else about us. He was Charlie Price.

Charlie's greatest impact as a teacher for me was in his course, *Liturgics* – the history, development, theology and practice of liturgy, common worship. There is little doubt that over a period of twenty five years Price's contributions to *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979) and *The Hymnal* (1982) left the greatest mark on the life of the Episcopal Church made by any single individual during that important and significant period of change and new life. What Charlie taught in his course, *Liturgics*, was appreciation and understanding of the height and depth of Christian worship, as it has been shaped and practiced in the Anglican Communion.

*Liturgics* was followed in the succeeding semester by an elective course in the Theology of the Sacraments. Early in that semester, the younger of the Price's two daughters died tragically.

Betty and Charlie were away for the weekend while he preached in the parish he had once established, St. Michael's, Ligonier, Pennsylvania, outside Pittsburgh. An older, experienced and trusted woman was left in charge of the Price daughters. Saturday afternoon a group of neighborhood children gathered to play in the Price's house. The game was "Kitty Kitty." Emily, age six, was "IT", led around on a leash of nylon chord.

When the older children tired of the game, they attached the end of Emily's leash to the banister in the upper hall. No one knows what happened, only that later, when the children and baby-sitter returned to the downstairs hall and looked up, there Emily was hanging, suspended by the chord. Dead.

The Burial of the Dead took place on Tuesday morning in the Seminary Chapel. The Senior Class gathered as a body in the choir. No one knew who would conduct the service, until the small white casket appeared in the Nave, and then Charlie started down the aisle with the body, saying, "I am the resurrection and the life." He was the sole officiant. He read the full text of First Corinthians, Chapter Fifteen, seldom heard in its entirety. He included a prayer that later became part of the burial liturgy. It says, in part: "Acknowledge, we humbly beseech thee, a sheep of thine own fold, a lamb of thine own flock, a sinner of thine own redeeming." He concluded with the prayers he had said with Emily each night, including the hymn, "Jesus tender shepherd, hear me, bless thy little lamb tonight." He completed the entire service without ever faltering or stumbling, but when it had ended, he wandered off alone, onto a great expanse of lawn, his body visibly racked by sobs.

The next morning the small group enrolled in Charlie's course on the theology of the sacraments gathered, uncertain if he would appear. But he did, and opened the class by saying: "Thank you for your prayers and for your presence yesterday in Chapel. If any of you would like to talk with me about what has happened, please do, and I shall try to respond. Meanwhile, it is important that I teach. I am first of all a teacher. If my work becomes more difficult than I can bear, I shall be the first to let you know. Now, let us turn to the material of the day."

Three years after my graduation from the Seminary, I happened to be back in the Refectory for lunch one spring day, when I saw a familiar face, Nathan Pusey, President of Harvard, who, I learned, had traveled to Alexandria to ask Charlie to serve as Preacher to the University. Charlie accepted the offer, and he and Pusey became great friends. Charlie said he never would have undertaken the position, had it not been offered as the personal hope of President Pusey, embodied by his presence that day in Alexandria.

When Charles Price returned from Harvard to teach again at Virginia Seminary in 1972, *The Boston Globe* published a long article describing his Harvard tenure. Charlie was typically self-effacing in the interview, speaking of what he might have done better.

I sat down and wrote him a letter saying that there was no one who could have done it better. I went on to say that I knew whereof I wrote and remember writing, "You changed my life." Price replied in a hand-written note, "I have always maintained that I deal not in quantity but quality. You merely prove my point."

When in 1987 I was asked to join the Seminary faculty, I consulted Charlie before making a decision. He wrote, recalling what Angus Dun had said to him when he was considering Pusey's offer to go to Harvard. Charlie remembered that the Bishop of Washington had written "No one can tell another what to do." This from a man who knew both Harvard and the Seminary well. Still, Dun went on to say, "But I think you ought to do it." Then wrote Charlie to me, "I think you ought to do it." I did.

The last time I heard Charlie preach was at Cliff Stanley's Burial. Cliff had been Charlie's own teacher, model and mentor. The text Charlie chose was Genesis 6:4. "It was a time when giants walked the earth." Without a doubt, the words fitted Cliff. So too, they described the preacher.

There was no way, none, that Charles Price was not a giant: teacher, preacher, pastor, priest, friend, mentor, model, thoroughly married and deeply loyal to those matters and meanings central to his life that were many. He was consistent and natural, skilled with words and music, the language of science and of the soul. In my life experience I have known no one who is his equal.

Charlie was fond of speaking of "The Price Comma", an important emendation of the Nicene Creed of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. The Price Comma, however, is not nearly as important as the Price Rubric, the Easter Rubric that Charlie wrote and appended to the service of the Burial of the Dead. These are the words that sum up the life of Charles Philip Price.

Note:

*The liturgy for the dead is an Easter liturgy. It finds all its meaning in the resurrection. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we too shall be raised.*

*The liturgy, therefore, is characterized by joy, in the certainty that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

*This joy, however, does not make human grief unchristian. The very love we have for each other in Christ brings deep sorrow when we are parted by death. Jesus himself wept at the grave of his friend. So, while we rejoice that one we love has entered the nearer presence of our Lord, we sorrow in sympathy with those who mourn.*

