

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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Abu

The Rev. John M. Keith

When Hurricane Katrina demolished the home of our daughter and her family in New Orleans, they moved to the “Triangle” area of North Carolina. My wife, Rilla, is an only child, as is our daughter, Lauren. Rilla’s father, a farmer from Georgia, observed that, in the barnyard when a hen has many chicks, she’ll cluck and raise her wings and all the chicks will run toward her; but if the hen has only one chick, she’ll scurry all over the barnyard chasing the mischievous runaway. We followed the pattern of the old hen and moved from Alabama — where we had ministered for decades — and purchased a retirement home south of Chapel Hill, close to Lauren’s family.

In North Carolina I have had the opportunity to do more reading and writing (something I was unable to do during a busy retirement in Alabama serving in four different interim positions). I wanted to leave words that would tell my grandchildren a little bit about who I was, what I believed, and what I did in life. My theological musings and memories resulted in a book, *Complete Humanity in Jesus: A Theological Memoir*, which was published in early 2009. Although the book was written for my grandchildren, they provided their own perspectives of faith, even at ages younger than two. Whenever I baby-sit, I spend the night so that my daughter and son-in-law can have a late date. I always adapt the Celtic prayer as I tuck the little ones in: “I lie down with God, and God lies down with me. I lie down with Christ, and Christ lies down with me. I lie down with the Spirit, and the Spirit lies down with me. God and Christ and Spirit be with me this night and through the day tomorrow.” As infants they cannot understand these words, but I always hope the sentiment may penetrate their hearts.

Recently following the bedtime ritual and after a few moments of cuddling, my four-year-old grandson Lennox asked, “Abu, who are all these people lying down with us?” Explaining the Trinity to a four-year-old stretched my powers of communication; but when I told him they were different names for God and different ways that God is with us, he seemed satisfied. Perhaps four-year-olds have a greater capacity to understand the Triune God than many of their elders.

In a few moments he raised another issue, however, and said, “Abu, that was a very short prayer.” He often thanks God for the trees and the sky and the animals and all his friends and family members and pets by name, in part to delay “lights out.” We then gave thanks for the members of our family and asked God to bless them; and Lennox responded, “That’s better.” Then he was content to turn off the lamp.

My daughter recently agreed to coordinate the altar guild at her parish in Durham, much to the astonishment of her father; a priest's child should know better than to enter that potential conflict zone. Usually our son-in-law, Neill, keeps Lennox and Arabella on Saturdays when Lauren prepares the chancel for Sunday worship; but one week Neill was out of town, and the children had to accompany Lauren. Several times in the darkened and empty building Lennox asked, "Where are all the people?" Lauren told him that they would be present the next day on Sunday. Each time he responded, "But Mommy, the church is not the church without the people."

The last page of my book concludes:

In my arms before she was one year old, Arabella would feel my face with her fingertips, like a blind person learning the contours of a countenance. No other baby nor child nor adult has ever explored the features of my visage as carefully as she, as if seeking a deep understanding of who I am.

After raucous horse-playing late in the afternoon at the end of a full day . . . , a weary Lennox crawled up into my lap and put his arms around my neck and without any prompting or suggestion to my great surprise said spontaneously, "I love you, Abu (what he calls me, the abbreviation of *abuelo*, Spanish for grandfather), and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

Before they can articulate it in words — perhaps better than after articulation is mastered — children can help us to recognize what is most important in life and tell us who we really are and understand us at the core of our being. They know, and we sometimes forget, that being able to give love and being able to receive love are at the center of what it means to be human.

Forcing me to explain my pious phrases and make them real, reminding me to thank God for our family and friends, understanding that the church is more about people than buildings, and demonstrating how to give and receive love, my little grandchildren have led me into fuller truth.



John M. Keith was the first priest ordained in the Diocese of Nicaragua. This year marks John and Rilla's fortieth wedding anniversary, as well as the fortieth anniversary of his ordination. During the thirty-five years of his ministry in the Diocese of Alabama, he continued to engage in mission support for Central America. John and Rilla now live in Ferrington Village, North Carolina; and John serves as Priest Associate at the Chapel of the Cross in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.