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King Edward IV and his Yorkist troops are beseeched by a priest to stop the pursuit of their Lancastrian foes who have requested sanctuary from Tewkesbury Abbey. Richard Burchett (1815–75)

Sanctuary: A Place Apart

By Edward W. Schmidt, S.J.

A **sanctuary** is a holy place. It is a place set aside, set apart for sacred encounters between God and his human subjects. It is a place for worship, for ritual, for prayer, for special time when everyday things are allowed to rest for a while.

In the bible, sanctuary refers most precisely to the Temple in Jerusalem, whether to its Holy of Holies or to the whole Temple complex. References vary. This is where the people made sacrifice and other offerings to the Lord. A priest presided over these rites.

According to the Bible Dictionary, sanctuary is used twice in a derived sense, indicating a place of refuge, where “the Lord refers to himself metaphorically as the ‘sanctuary’ (i.e. refuge) of faithful Israelites in distress.” This occurs in Isaiah 8:14 and Ezekiel 11:16.

The book of Numbers too establishes six sanctuaries, cities of refuge, where someone who has accidentally killed someone else can flee for safety and

for trial. There are strict rules governing these places of refuge. But their point is to provide a place where a society can face a bad situation fairly and calmly.

In Christian churches, the sanctuary is the area around the altar, considered especially sacred for the rites performed there. This area is often raised above the level of the floor of the main space of the church. In earlier times it was set off by an altar rail, which is still sometimes seen.

In Christian Europe “sanctuary” early developed the sense of a place where one who was pursued for political or criminal reasons could flee for a time of safety. These places were usually the churches, and the concept was governed by civil law. But they were recognized as a societal need to let passions cool and to allow truth to be discovered and heard. Here the church provided an alternative to the workings of the state.

English usage often extends “sanctuary” to a place of safety for birds or other animals or for plants. In my younger days, Kennedy Park in our neighborhood in Chicago had a “bird haven” at 113th and Maplewood. “Haven” is a regular synonym for “sanctuary.”

In the United States, sanctuary became important in the resistance to the war in Viet Nam, where churches offered to protect men drafted from having to go into the army. Results were not great. Canada too had a sanctuary movement for U.S. draftees who did not support the war.

Recent times have seen the rise of “sanctuary cities,” cities that have declared themselves safe for migrants and refugees. Sanctuary cities were established for refugees from wars in Central America during the 1980s. And today the concept has returned to provide some protection for refugees that some government policies seek to exclude or expel.

A group of religious sisters based in Pennsylvania, the Adorers of the Blood of Christ, among their good works have been active in ecological issues. They have issued a “Land Ethic” which reads in part: “Whereas, we Adorers of the Blood of Christ believe creation is a revelation of God, we proclaim that . . . As prophets, we reverence Earth as a sanctuary where all life is protected; we strive to establish justice and right relationships so that all creation might thrive.”

Sanctuary now becomes a movement for American universities. When plans for mass deportations were announced in November 2016, many students rose up in protest, particularly to protect their fellow students who might have been undocumented. And without using the term “sanctuary,” at the end of November 2016 most of the presidents of the Jesuit colleges and universities signed a statement expressing their commitment to their students who might be targeted for deportation.

The specific issues have changed through the ages, but the need for protection, for a place of safety, for refuge, for sanctuary endures.

Edward W. Schmidt, S.J., is the editor of Conversations; he is also a senior editor at America Media.

(Note that other articles in this issue help to explain the term *sanctuary*: Howard Gray’s “Sanctuary of the Heart,” page 8, and John McKay’s “Law, Policy, and the Sanctuary Campus,” page 30.)

Notes on AJCU presidents

On July 1, 2017, Dr. Mark Nemec became the ninth president of Fairfield University, succeeding Fr. Jeffrey von Arx, S.J., who resigned last December. This brings the number of lay presidents of A.J.C.U. schools to 14, which is exactly half of the 28 Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States.



Dr. Mark Nemec

Doctor Nemec is the fourth new president since August 2016, when Jo Ann Rooney became president of Loyola University Chicago. In January 2017 Debra Townsley became interim president of Wheeling Jesuit University. In June 2017 Herbert Keller, S.J., became interim president

of the University of Scranton. Scott Pilarz, S.J., has been named president of the University of Scranton; he will assume office on July 1, 2018.

In an address at Santa Clara University in 2000 with representatives of the 28 schools in attendance, Father General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach articulated his vision for the future of Jesuit education. This included a strong endorsement of entrusting leadership to dedicated laypersons steeped in the Jesuit spirit. The Jesuit schools



Dr. Jo Ann Rooney

with lay presidents are Canisius College, Fairfield University, Georgetown University, Gonzaga University, Le Moyne College, Loyola Marymount University, Loyola University Chicago, Marquette University, St. Joseph’s University, St. Louis University, Saint Peter’s University, Spring Hill College, University of Detroit Mercy, and Wheeling Jesuit University. These presidents greatly enrich the tradition and the future of Jesuit education.

Dr. Rooney’s photo: © Natalie Battaglia