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JOHN COPELAND NAGLE: A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

*Patricia O'Hara**

Many fine law schools have faculty members who are outstanding teachers, preeminent scholars, and generous colleagues. Few law schools are as blessed as we were at Notre Dame to have someone as singular as John Copeland Nagle—a person who was all those things professionally, but who was also a man without self-serving ego or guile; a man possessed of a moral compass that made him “true north” to so many of us; a person who consistently acted out of charity in an effort to do the right thing in all things.

John was genuine, authentic, self-giving, and humble with every person with whom he was in relationship. John lived with one face—in my mind, the face of Jesus Christ. He searched to see Christ in everyone whom he met, even the most difficult; he strove to be Christ-like to all whom he encountered. John called each of us to be our best selves. Like Thomas More, the lawyer-saint depicted in stained glass in our chapel, John was the law’s good servant, but God’s first.

In twenty years of daily kindnesses and good cheer, it is hard to pick my favorite memories of John, but two, in particular, come to mind. The first is an example of hundreds of times that John came to the aid of a colleague. John and his family first came to Notre Dame Law School in 1998 on a visiting appointment from Seton Hall. I became dean a year later following the retirement of a long-serving dean of twenty-four years. The search for a successor had been rocky, and I was an unlikely choice—unlikely for many reasons, not the least of which was that I had been outside the Law School serving in the University’s central administration for nearly a decade.

I quickly assessed that even though John had been in the academy for only five years and was new to Notre Dame, he was a well-established scholar to whom both junior and senior faculty members would listen.

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I made a beeline to his office and sought his help in healing the divisions caused by the search, and in identifying and recruiting young talent to the faculty. John did not calculate the internal political cost of helping an inexperienced dean who had few scholarly credentials of her own; he simply jumped right in to assist me.

One of the very first junior faculty members whom John recruited wrote an excellent law review article after only a short time on the faculty and received an offer to publish it from a major law review. No sooner had the young faculty member accepted the offer, than the top law review in the country extended an offer for the same piece. The young faculty member felt bound to honor his original commitment.

John heard about these circumstances, contacted the law review that initially accepted the article, and offered to write a substitute piece if the journal would release his young colleague. The student editors did not want to alienate a scholar of John's stature, but at the same time, they were reluctant to give up a piece in which the top journal in the country had an interest. They replied diplomatically that ordinarily they would jump at John's offer, but that he could not possibly meet their publication deadline of six weeks. This response gave John just the opening he needed: he promised to meet the deadline, squirreled himself away, and delivered the article in timely fashion. The young faculty member published his article with the top law journal in the country. Today he is a chaired professor in his own right.

This example of John's generosity remains in my mind for several reasons. It speaks to John's national stature as a scholar. Of more significance, it speaks to his unselfishness as a colleague, as well as to his humility. I never once heard John recount this story; he simply trumpeted the accomplishment of his young colleague. I only heard the story months later from a faculty member at one of the other law schools involved.

The second memory that comes to my mind occurred several years later when I told John that after only a decade in the academy, the University had promoted him to a chaired professorship. I remember choking up in telling him the good news. It is always an honor to promote a faculty member whose record objectively reflects outstanding merit as measured by the academy. As I explained to John at the time, however, it is a special privilege to do so when the recipient deserves the recognition at a much deeper level because of the unselfishness, leadership, and faith that animated his efforts.

John choked up a bit himself—I believe in response to my emotion. His words were not tinged by any hint of entitlement; rather, they were characterized by his usual humility. What I remember specifically is that he said he wanted to head home to share the news

with his wife, and together pray for guidance regarding the increased stewardship responsibilities triggered by the promotion. As foreign as this response might seem to others, it was quintessentially John.

During what proved to be John's final days following heart surgery, his wife, Lisa, and daughters, Laura and Julia, chose St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, Chapter 8, Verses 38–39, in their call for prayers:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.¹

John's family called us back to these same words at his Memorial Service even when their hopes for his healing had been dashed. With their choice of that passage, born from the depth of the faith they shared with John, they reminded us that our stories are not entirely our own. Our stories are bounded by a concept of time, which is limited in a way that God is not.

As St. Paul tells us, in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to His purpose.² John was called to live in the light of Christ, and he lived his whole life—mind, heart, and soul—faithful to that call.

We saw the light of Christ reflected in John's scholarship. John tackled complicated issues across multiple areas of law. Especially in environmental law, he did so from an explicitly Christian perspective grounded in biblical concepts of stewardship. The academy sometimes grants little purchase to a faith perspective, but John's scholarship was published in the top law journals in the country and in a leading university press. The acuity of his mind, the strength of his voice, and the creativity of his insights could not be ignored. John also reflected the light of Christ in his mentorship of students and of faculty colleagues here at Notre Dame, as well as colleagues across the country in the academy, the judiciary, and the bar. Most of all, John reflected the light of Christ in his life as a loving husband, adoring and adored father, and faithful son and brother.

All of us wish we could have shared more years with John in the human measure of time, but he lived his call from God so fully in his time with us that we knew him to his depth. We could have known him longer, but we would not have known him better. His true self shone through in all his days with us. As one of his dearest friends from another law school commented during the Memorial Service for John,

1 *Romans* 8:38–39.

2 *See Romans* 8:28.

he traveled to South Bend because he thought that he enjoyed a singular relationship with John; what he discovered while he was here was that we all enjoyed that same quality of relationship. John made everyone feel singular. He was fully present and fully engaged with everyone with whom he came in contact. Over the course of twenty years, I never heard him speak an unkind word about another person. He rejoiced in the glory of God's physical creation and in the dignity of every person he met. His capacity to share himself with people knew no bounds.

The poet, W.H. Auden, famously wrote: "When a just man dies, Lamentation and praise, Sorrow and joy, are one."³ For those of us blessed with the gift of John's faith in resurrection and reunion, the magnitude of our loss is matched by our confidence that we will see once again this giant of a man and feel the warmth of his all-embracing smile. Until then, we owe him our best effort to model the many lessons he taught us—lessons in law and lessons in life.

³ W.H. Auden, *Elegy for J.F.K.* in COLLECTED POEMS 754–55 (Edward Mendelson ed., 1991).