

Q&A with the New Canon to the Ordinary

The Rev. Kathryn Ryan has been appointed Canon to the Ordinary, effective January 1, 2014. Ryan has served as rector of Ascension, Dallas, since 1999, and recently answered a few questions from Carol Barnwell, diocesan communication director, about her background and the gifts she brings to her new position.

CEB: Can you share a bit about where you are from and how you grew up?

KR: I was born in Raton, NM, the youngest of four daughters, and spent virtually all of my childhood in New Mexico. I was taken from the delivery room at Miner's Hospital to the font at Holy Trinity Episcopal Church without much delay. My father edited small town newspapers before joining the Albuquerque Journal. My mother kept up with four young daughters until I began school. She eventually became the information officer and then a hearings officer for the NM State Employment Service and died in 1995. My father is still living in Albuquerque with my stepmother.

CEB: Was your family active in the Episcopal Church?

KR: All of my years of primary and secondary school were in Albuquerque, where my family attended St. Mark's on-the-Mesa. I have been known to tell inquirers that I consider myself a product of National Geographic specials and the Episcopal Church. My sisters and I frequented Friday evening potlucks, learned hymns handwritten on flip charts in Sunday school, sang in the choir, and were nurtured and challenged at Camp Stoney (the diocesan camp), and through youth group and diocesan youth activities, including Happening. One of my most formative experiences as a young person at St. Mark's was serving on a committee that worked to support Cambodian refugees being resettled in Albuquerque.

CEB: What was your path to seminary following college graduation?

KR: I attended Sewanee, the University of the South (upon which I never laid eyes until arriving for my freshman year), graduating in 1986 with a BA in Philosophy. I moved from Sewanee to San Antonio, where I had the pleasure of reconnecting with the Rev. Rick Benson and working for him at the Episcopal college ministry at San Antonio College. After a short stay in San Antonio, I returned to Albuquerque, where I worked as a legal assistant while formally discerning a call to the priesthood. I served in youth ministry as a volunteer at the parish and diocesan level and then gave up my legal assistant job to become the interim director of Camp Stoney.

I met Tim Ryan when I attended Sewanee. His father is an Episcopal priest from the Diocese of Southwest Florida. We were married in the spring of 1989.

An Episcopal search and election delayed my entry into the discernment process and seminary, but in the fall of 1989, with the support of the Diocese of the Rio Grande and Bishop Terence Kelshaw, I entered the junior M.Div. class at Seminary of the Southwest in Austin. Tim attended law school at the University of Texas. The burdens of dual (or dueling, depending on how you

look at it) academic demands - financially, spiritually, and emotionally - were greatly lessened by the encouragement Tim and I received while worshiping at St. James' and then worshiping and serving at All Saints', Austin, and the generosity of the afterschool program at St. Andrew's Episcopal School, known at that time to hire starving seminarians.

After graduating from UT Law, Tim accepted a one-year position as a briefing attorney at the 3rd Circuit Court of Appeals. All Saints' and the Rev. Armistead Powell agreed to allow me to serve there for my diaconal formation, as well as continue on as their youth minister.

I was ordained to the diaconate in the Diocese of the Rio Grande in 1992, and at All Saints' on behalf of the Diocese of Central Gulf Coast by Bishop Scott Field Bailey in 1993. Tim and I had decided we would accept a call from St. Luke's in Mobile, AL where I was called to serve as the associate. We moved to Mobile in the summer of 1993.

CEB: You have served in a number of capacities, both in church and beyond, during your career. What have you found most helpful?

KR: In the six years at St. Luke's, I received invaluable experience in the breadth of parish and school ministry. In addition, I was privileged to serve on boards in the community and the diocese, including a term as chair of the Commission on Ministry. We left Mobile in 1999 when I accepted a call to serve as Rector of Ascension in Dallas. I was drawn to Ascension, in part, because of its multicultural character.

Outside the parish while in Dallas, I have served on the local YMCA's Board of Management, on the Board of the Seminary of the Southwest in Austin (currently the Governance Committee chair), as a delegate to Provincial Synod and as an alternate deputy to the 2012 General Convention. I began work in 2007 on a D. Min. in parish leadership at Perkins School of Theology at SMU, which I hope to complete by this spring. (*Building Up the Body: Preparing Lay Persons for Ministries of Leadership in Multicultural Episcopal Congregations*)

CEB: Upon what did you base your decision to accept the position as Canon to the Ordinary?

KR: The Diocese of Texas exudes creativity and energy, and an optimism about the Episcopal Church's role in God's unfolding future. I have been fortunate over the years to encounter your diocesan life through my work on the Seminary of the Southwest Board, presentations at Curate Camp, visits to Camp Allen, personal associations with clergy and laity, and the fine resources produced by the Diocese and shared with the Church.

Consistently, I find the conviction that God intends a bright future for the Episcopal Church as an agent of God's loving presence in and for the world. Of course I know that life in any diocese or parish is not all tea and cupcakes! However, I am excited about the opportunity to serve God in a Diocese that claims areas of difference as opportunities for holy conversation, that believes our deepest call is to serve Christ in the realities of our current context, and that believes in high standards and in God's grace and forgiveness.

I know the commitment of the Diocese of Texas to raise up, recruit and nurture spiritually grounded and effective clergy for God's mission in the world. My own ministry has been shaped for many years by the encouragement, challenge and support of Bishops Dena Harrison and Claude Payne. Bishop Doyle was a trusted and inspiring colleague long before he was elected bishop. I have respected the work of Canon Anne Normand. I have seen their hard and careful efforts to develop in and for the Church passionate and skillful clergy leaders, and I am excited and hopeful that my ministry may add to that tradition.

CEB: What about your parish ministry and experience do you think will be particularly helpful in your new position?

KR: From where I stand now, I believe that my experiences of clergy and staff recruitment and development and cross-cultural ministry are particular experiences that will equip me to make a sound beginning in my new role.

In the parish, filling ministry positions requires a realistic balance between finding the fully prepared candidate and equipping and nurturing candidates who are available and willing, or assigned to the parish for one reason or another. Over twenty years of parish ministry, I have had the occasional grace to identify and empower clergy and lay leaders with all of the skills, habits, faith and knowledge needed to immediately carry out a ministry. More often, I have had to prayerfully identify potential in one or more of those areas, and then offer the on-the-job support to help a person grow into their role. I hope this experience will allow me to assist congregations and clergy in transition, who often look for the perfect fit, to find the match to which God is calling.

Cross-cultural ministry is another experience with which I enter the position of Canon to the Ordinary. Growing up in Albuquerque formed me to experience cultural diversity as normative, and to read the heavenly vision of the Book of Revelation (nations gathered around the Lamb worshipping) as the true picture of heaven and the ideal for the Church on earth.

After six years in Mobile, going to Ascension, with its cultural and ethnic diversity, felt like going home. However, I discovered the complexities of leading a multicultural institution, and the real challenges of developing unity, making room for one another, and pursuing common mission across cultural boundaries. For the past fourteen years, I have practiced listening to people of other cultures, have made and been forgiven for mistakes, and have worked to build bridges of understanding and cooperation in the service of God's mission. God has deeply blessed Ascension and me by bringing us together. I pray that God will use those experiences to bring blessings to the congregations and clergy of the Diocese of Texas.

CEB: What particular gifts do you have personally that make you a great choice?

KR: Analytical thinking, mentoring, candor and discretion.

CEB: What do most look forward to in this new ministry? What part of the portfolio for canon is most challenging?

KR: I look forward to working with Bishop Doyle, the other bishops, and the staff, and to coming to know the uniqueness of the congregations and clergy of the Diocese, and supporting them to discover transitions as holy opportunities. I think the Title IV work will be most challenging, both in the clarity required for its fair implementation, and in the instances in which it must be utilized. I pray most for God's grace when I consider that aspect of the portfolio.

CEB: Do you already have a breadth of clergy acquaintances from across the church that will help you recruit new clergy?

KR: I do have a breadth of clergy and lay acquaintances from my time in four dioceses, service on the Seminary of the Southwest Board, and Credos and Gatherings of Leaders, among other sources of connections. I trust the good will of those friends will extend to my efforts to recruit the best and brightest to the Diocese of Texas!

Recruitment requires that I know the congregations and institutions of the Diocese and their gifts, graces, and needs, and know the gifts, graces and needs of the clergy of the Diocese and, in so far as I can, the broader church. I imagine my role to be the articulation of this knowledge of the congregations to the clergy and the clergy to the congregations, in order that the Holy Spirit can lead us all to right connections.

I believe the Church's breadth and depth requires a diverse body of clergy leaders. All who will serve effectively will share some common characteristics - spiritual and moral integrity, energy for Christ's mission, a heart for the world and a love for and a confidence in the Church and her people as a blessing to the world. However, they will come from a variety of seminaries and backgrounds, cultures, generations, and theological positions in order to build up the congregations and the Diocese for God's mission.

CEB: Have you known Bishop Doyle for a long time?

KR: It was while serving at All Saints', Austin as youth minister that I first came to know Andy Doyle. He had not yet gone to Virginia Theological Seminary. He and JoAnne were working at St. Stephen's and Andy came to assist with the youth group at All Saints'. Collaborating with Andy in ministry was always creative, quirky and fun. Though I think we were both deadly serious about our desire to give the youth tools to help them to rely on Jesus Christ, to build up their faith, and engage them in the life and mission of the church, the style with which he did so was playful and infectious.

Years later, we were in a clergy support group together until his call to become Canon to the Ordinary for Bishop Don Wimberly. Our connection was renewed following his election as bishop, when he became involved with the Board of the Seminary of the Southwest. I was more than honored to preach at his installation as Bishop of Texas at Christ Church Cathedral.

CEB: When and how did you first experience your call to the priesthood? Has it been what you anticipated?

KR: I grew up in a diocese and at a time in which the ministry of the baptized was strongly emphasized and nurtured. I came to understand that God calls each of God's people, and would

call me, to a life that would add to God's mission in the world. I began to sense relatively early that I had the sort of gifts that were appreciated and beneficial to the work of leadership in the Church - listening, analyzing, speaking, sharing and encouraging faith. My first regular, private devotion was reading the psalms in sequence, night after night. In them, I heard the voices of God's people, and the voice of God, speaking toward redemption and hope. I became convicted over several years during high school that my particular call was to ordained ministry, to strengthen the Body of Christ through the ministry of word and sacrament. Happening and camp staff put me in places where I could try out, as a young person, the sorts of pastoral leadership expected of priests, and could be shaped by and learn to rely on and yearn to offer others access to the sacraments. In the parish and the Diocese was also was the community in which, because of Christ, I was accepted as I was, yet encouraged to grow into all God called me to be. I heard God's invitation that I could offer the same to others.

Looking back on twenty years as a priest, I have to say that there's a lot in the functional life of a priest that doesn't touch directly on accepting people where they are, and, in Christ, encouraging them to become all God means them to be. How does fixing a water fountain or collaborating in decisions about building usage help God's people grow into the full stature of Christ? I suppose I have been surprised at the amount of the mundane that fills the life and ministry of a priest (or, at least, this priest!), and at how often the common things become the vehicles for transformation. However, I also did not fully anticipate how powerfully God's presence would be experienced by others just by simple acts of listening, laying someone to rest at a burial, or celebrating the Eucharist with intentionality. I suppose the priesthood has surprised me, both in its earthly demands and its divine grace.

Favorite book or author-ministry wise

Leading Across Cultures, by James Plueddemann

Best last read for pleasure

Lean In, by Sheryl Sandberg (non-fiction)

Favorite pastime outside work - running, cooking, hiking or other outdoor activities with family

Tim's specialty?

Tim is a partner in Schell, Cooley, where he focuses on medical liability defense and medical products liability defense. He will continue in his work with the firm, though from our residence in Houston.

How old are your children?

Ned is 18 and a freshman at Goucher College in Baltimore; Eleanor is 12 and in 7th grade

You may contact Kai (pronounced Kay) Ryan at: kryan@epicenter.org after December 1, 2013.