



Neale A. Secor

July 3, 1934 ~ November 14, 2017 (age 83)

The Rev. Neale A. Secor, a former lawyer and retired Episcopal priest who served a parish in Harlem in the turbulent sixties & seventies and later became a leader in protecting the rights and welfare of seafarers from around the world, died Nov. 16 at his home in Philadelphia PA.

Death came after a long battle with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) in the arms of his husband Ricardo and his two sons, Jonathan and Thomas Secor. He had long expressed a desire to be at home when the end came, with those he loved and who loved him.

Under Father Secor, the Seamen's Church Institute of Philadelphia and South Jersey dramatically expanded to visit more ships at more maritime terminals on both sides of the Delaware River, and provide a broader range of services to seafarers.

He combined experience as a lawyer and priestly skills to quietly intervene when corrupt companies abandoned seafarers in Philadelphia or ship captains pocketed money intended to feed and pay their crews. When negligence killed a seafarer, he negotiated a payment to the widow equal to what the seaman would have earned during the rest of his life.

Often with wit and grace, he persistently reminded titans on the waterfront of their debt to the sweat and muscle of workers -- longshoremen, truck drivers, seafarers, river pilots and members of the Coast Guard -- all of whom often work in harm's way.

“Without them,” as he put it, “you don't get diddly squat.”

“Father Secor was compassionate, smart and extremely hard working. He cared about people, period,” said Mesfin Ghebrewoldi, a former seafarer who has been a ship visitor for Seamen's Church Institute for more than 35 years.

When Father Secor retired from SCI in 1996, he kept his townhome in Center City Philadelphia and bought a small cabana on the north shore of the Dominican Republic Samana Peninsula, where he spent winter months. He chose the Caribbean island nation, he told The Philadelphia Inquirer at the time, because he wanted to learn more about human relationships. “Life here is losing its interconnectedness. Life there is so hard that it requires that people talk to each other, so hard that people help each other. It is a simpler, more vital culture.”

Even after the onset of serious illness, Father Secor remained active. He enjoyed cultural performances in Philadelphia, and helped start a seniors group at the Episcopal Church of St. Luke and the Epiphany in Philadelphia, where he was a member for 30 years.

He traveled, usually in the company of Ricardo or his sons and their families, to the Bahamas, Cambodia, Costa Rica, England, Egypt, France, Greece, Hong Kong, Italy, Jamaica, Martinique, Myanmar, the Philippines, Scotland, Spain and Thailand. He said he found travel “both informative and humbling.”

He also enjoyed weeklong visits from each of his grandchildren, which they called “Grandpa Camp.”

Father Secor graduated with honors from the University of Chicago Law School in 1959. While there he was a precinct captain in a recently integrated section of Chicago's South Side, and was a founder of the university's Legal Aid Clinic.

In Cleveland, Ohio, he worked as a trial attorney for four years at a leading corporate firm. The firm loaned young lawyers to the county prosecutor to gain trial experience. “Helping send poor young men to prison caused me to want to learn more about God—not religion, God,” he told The Philadelphia Inquirer years later.

In 1962, Secor and his wife Christine, who died of cancer in 1988, moved the family from an upscale neighborhood in Cleveland to a walk-up tenement in New York City so that he could study for the priesthood at Union Theological

Seminary. While there he participated in "inner-city" ministerial strategies, established a young adult center and ministry in San Francisco, brought back to life a tiny church in Crested Butte, Colorado, and worked with the National Council of Churches on the emerging issues involving gays and the church. He graduated magna, and won the preaching award.

He did seminary field training at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in West Harlem, New York City, beginning in the fall of 1962. He later became the rector, a position he held until 1980. While at St. Mary's he was integrally active in several movements -- civil rights, anti-war, ordination of women, gay rights and welfare rights. As the rector of St. Mary's Father Secor and other the priests ordained 12 women in Philadelphia, the first ordination of women in the Episcopal church, and contrary to church law at the time.

Father Secor was born in Mount Kisco New York in 1934 to Allen Burtis Secor and Edith Winifred Eible. His father was a manager for Sears Roebuck and his mother was a homemaker.

He is survived by his husband Ricardo Liriano, two sons Jonathan Dimock Secor and Thomas Neale Secor, their wives Ana Maria Harkins and Carla Buranelli-Secor, his grand-children Christina Gabriella Secor, Alegra Dora Secor, Luca Alejandro Secor and Emilia Christine Secor as well as his brother Philip Bruce Secor.

Funeral Services will be at 11 a.m. Saturday Dec. 2, at the Church of St. Luke and the Epiphany, 330 S. 13th St., Philadelphia, followed by a reception. Flowers are welcome.

In 2009, when asked by Drew University to write about life after graduation, Father Secor wrote: "In all, I have been fortunate to have lived a full and (to me) interesting life. The intervening years have not been without error or trauma. And they haven't always been lived conventionally or on the safe side. But they never have been dull, nor in some magical way, devoid of God at their center. I have been a lucky fellow."