

Litchfield Priest Says Charismatics, 'Born-Agains' Can Be 'Offensive'

An Episcopal priest in Litchfield said this week some members of the "born-again" and charismatic Christian movements have lost sight of the democratic aspect of Christian experience.

The Rev. Richard Nolan, vicar of St. Paul's parish, said in his Sunday sermon this week some born-again Christians are "offensive" in the way they exclude other persons from authentic Christian experience.

"Gifts from God come in different forms and degrees," Nolan said. "To say that, because I have had a certain experience, I am authentically Christian and you aren't is unfair."

Nolan said the emphasis placed on "speaking in tongues" by some charismatic Christians is out of proportion to the Biblical view of the phenomenon.

"Speaking in tongues is only one of many gifts, and St. Paul says it's the least of the gifts," Nolan said.

"I don't want to write off the whole thing," Nolan said of the born-again movement. "I can't judge whether a given experience is valid or not. I'm more concerned with whether or not the response to the experience is in line with Biblical teachings."

The term charismatic derives from the Greek work *charismata*, meaning gifts. Nolan said the writers of the New Testament were "democratic" about God's gifts, believing that each Christian possesses divine gifts in some form.

Nolan said the charismatic experience can be evaluated by certain guidelines based on an individual's response to the gifts. He said a

person's gifts can be considered genuine and holy if:

— They spur him to loving, helping action rather than making him smug.

— They give him a feeling of freedom rather than enslavement.

— They allow him to be sensitive to the varieties of religious experience and expression of other people.

— They cultivate a sense of gratitude and humility rather than pious arrogance.

Nolan also said the born-again experience described in the book of John (3:1-17) can be a gradual process of

religious awakening rather than the sudden flash of conversion sought at revival meetings.

Nolan said the charismatics, the born-again Christians and other now popular religious movements play an important role for mainline churches.

"They call us to account for ourselves," he said. "The make us define ourselves better as we look at them."

Nolan said the standards he put forth for judging the validity of charismatic experience "could be applied to any other Christian experience as easily."