

My pattern of crime

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [November 8, 2000](#) issue

Do you remember how zealous you were about reaching “perfect attendance” marks in grade school? How careful you were about avoiding the first “absent” day? How easy it was to fall into a pattern of delinquency and how you thought your parents foresaw a life of crime for you after even the smallest precedent-setting misdemeanor? A recent incident reminded me of these fears and made me recall how at three decisive career-turns, on three “first days,” I got off on the wrong foot with the law.

The incidents are etched on my brain. On Saturday, July 12, 1952, the eve of my ordination and beginning of what was to have been a lifetime in parish ministry, my bride and I checked into the Carlton Hotel in Oak Park, Illinois, a block from our residence-to-be. Because a wedding reception was being held at the hotel and the lot was full, I parked on the street. Next morning the car was ticketed. I was on the police blotter on the first day of my career!

The Oak Park police collected the one-dollar (one dollar!) fine and explained that there were no signs on the street “because everyone knows that Oak Park does not allow parking between 2:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m.” No excuses. My life of crime had begun.

The next incident came 11 years later on July 1, 1963, the first day of my teaching career. We jammed a huge station wagon with five small boys, lamps, typewriter and office paraphernalia. I entered an intersection when the light was yellow, not wanting to stop suddenly and have office furniture and children go flying. “But officer, I was through the intersection before the light turned red!” I exclaimed when the policeman stopped me. My plaint won no sympathy, and I began my teaching career at the University of Chicago with a traffic violation.

I can’t call my current turn the launching of a career, but in October I became interim president of St. Olaf College. I have only 3.5 months to make my mark. But as with the two earlier career turns, I got a bad grade on my first day on the new job.

I was bunking in a charming hostelry in Northfield, Minnesota. The hotel's smallish back lot was full of cars, so I parked in front, between the diagonal markers where I'd often seen people park.

Next morning the street was wet and my car was gone. Towed—for street cleaning, I learned. The hotel desk person responded to my woebegone queries by telling me that the hotel mounts a little green plastic "No Parking Midnight to Six a.m." sign on the front desk. Unfortunately, I had not gone past the desk that evening. I made my way to the towing company, bought back my car for \$63.90 (a bargain, to a Chicagoan) and paid my ticket (\$6.00, another commendable bargain).

But I had made the Northfield equivalent of the police blotter. By the time you read this, Northfielders may have read about the interim-acting-president's crime. I hope they have, because the day this happened I read how important it is that campus crime (which also means the off-campus crime of campusites) be reported. A small Catholic school in Clinton, Iowa, had just been fined \$25,000 for failing to report an incident.

So consider this both a reporting of my misdemeanor and a public apology to law-abiding Northfielders, admired St. Olafites and embarrassed but chortling Marty family members. You can be sure I won't again be looking for a new job or starting a new career. I couldn't stand the stress of a fourth breach of law on opening day.