

July 1, 2009

Dear Friends,

It is with deep sadness that I write to tell you of another departure from The Episcopal Church of one of our clergy and an entire mission congregation of our diocese. The Reverend Efren Garza and the people of Santa Maria Virgen have made a decision to leave The Episcopal Church and join the Liberal (Reformed) Catholic Church. The reason stated for this seemingly sudden decision is culturally based, in that Fr. Garza has expressed a strong and irreconcilable conviction that The Episcopal Church is unable to serve the Latino community and fully incorporate people of that culture into the institutional life of the church. They believe they will be better served in another denomination. This departure is effective as of June 30, 2009. Choosing not to renounce his orders, Fr. Garza is now under inhibition for abandonment of communion, and should he not recant his decision, I shall depose him in six months time. The Standing Committee and I have properly followed the canons of The Episcopal Church in handling this situation, and every attempt at reconciliation has and will continue to be made. I am most grieved by the severing of a relationship that I was not aware was so strained (in fact, quite the opposite) and for which there now seems little opportunity for a renewed life together. I could end this correspondence having informed you of this event; however, I am going to take this opportunity to break open some of the more touchy reality of the heart and soul of our diocese. And I do mean *our* diocese. For those who choose to be in this ministry of The Episcopal Church on the central coast of California, we are in this together, and at the core of our call is the ministry of reconciliation and restoration. As the second good book states, our mission is “to restore all people to unity with God and each other” (BCP, pg 855).

As you read this pastoral letter, I would like you to think of all the places in our diocesan and wider church life, in your own cultural life, and in your personal life where reconciliation and restoration are needed, where they have been illusive and where they have been successful. It is important that we resist focusing only on certain areas of life in need of healing, thereby making the need for restoration somehow issue driven – including some places and not others. It is not a cultural issue, a sexuality issue, a theological or political issue: it is a human issue. Even as we prepare to celebrate with great fanfare the independence of our country, we should remember that the United States exists in part because of an inability to reconcile differing views and values and be restored to unity with one another. Separating, instead of working through difference, is very much a part of our culture. In our history and in our present lives, brokenness is everywhere. As Christians we are called to be the reconciling presence of Jesus Christ: bringing healing grace into the midst of ruptured relationships, helping God to birth a new creation which reflects the beautiful vision of our unity with God and with one another in Christ.

As I have sat with the news of Santa Maria Virgen and the Garza family departure, in all the grief that holds for me particularly so soon after the less surprising departure of Fr. Ed McNeill and a portion of St. Edward’s congregation, I was strengthened by the “moment of grace” segment of Paul Edward’s presentation in Churches Without Walls. Nearly 400 of us attended those conferences back in January and February. If you were there, you will recall Paul’s teaching on the moment of willful separation between God and Jesus on the cross as the

sacrificial breaking apart of their unity. In taking on separation for the sake of the sinfulness of humanity, our brokenness was not cast out but instead brought in, restored and reconciled through Christ. Paul drew our attention to the physical experience of that moment of grace in the breaking of the bread during the celebration of the Eucharist, a breaking open by which we are graciously fed rather than legalistically turned away.

In Christ we are given the Godly way of unity and oneness, which radically challenges our all too frequent human way of separation. I am reminded that in these ruptures within our diocesan family, grace is nevertheless in the midst, sometimes unrecognized but mysteriously drawing us back together again, feeding, healing and restoring us in ways we cannot imagine but that God can. As we grieve the loss now of two clergy and a number of our brothers and sisters in Christ, I ask you to wonder and to trust in the reconciling work of Christ. I ask you to be open to how God wants to heal us together again – in whatever ways you may need in your own life, and certainly in all the ways we need in our church.

One of the realities of Santa Maria Virgen's departure is that the criticism of The Episcopal Church regarding the presence of Latinos in our church is not entirely incorrect. It is my observation in the church at large that a second-class Latino citizenry has been created. There is a "ghetto-ization" of sorts. Ask any Latino. While they may not personally feel that way, they are likely to acknowledge that systemic reality. This is not the intention of course, but having the lives, ministry and gifts of Latinos in our diocese and in the wider church as a natural and easy part of our common life has eluded us (and I say this, fully aware of the inadequacy of even the word "Latino," cognizant of this Americanization that lumps together so many distinct Spanish-speaking cultures -my apologies). Miami, where I was born and lived for nine years prior to coming to El Camino Real, is a city that is far more culturally integrated than I experience our cities to be on the central coast, yet the church there struggles just as we do with achieving a single, multi-cultural, just, inclusive citizenry. And with a Cuban bishop, no less! So it is not just a matter of the church modeling what is done in society at large.

One of the things that attracted me to El Camino Real was its heart for mission congregations and its desire to reach out to the Latino population. Even with this long-standing and obvious commitment, segregation that results from insidious institutional racism persists and seems quite immovable. That said I do want to affirm my belief that The Episcopal Church is a wonderful place for people of Latino culture. Our ecclesial values of democracy, empowered laity and accountability are typically embraced by Latinos who migrate to the United States and who become citizens of this country, making it their own. We are a church where we can all experience full inclusion in Jesus Christ, as well as full citizenship in our institutional life - and in a common national identity as Americans. While we do not always get it right, we are a collaborative, fully participatory church which demands our thoughtful and soulful engagement, as opposed to passively waiting to be told what to do. In addition, given the shifts in our national demographics, The Episcopal Church is uniquely poised to be part of the important conversation not only of intentionally re-shaping our church identity but that of our country.

Over the last six months, my Canon for Congregational Development, Jesus Reyes and I have worked together to articulate for our Diocese a scriptural and theological basis for a strategy

toward a unified, single, multi-cultural citizenship in Jesus Christ, in the Episcopal way (Another valid criticism of The Episcopal Church is that we are very intuitive, but not very strategic – we are working on it!). Frankly, this is the easy part. The reconciliation between Jew and Gentile forms the context for much of Paul’s writing in the New Testament on reconciliation and being one in Christ. For example in Ephesians 2, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God (2:19-22).” In our context, we do not have the luxury of joining into one household only two distinct identities: groups of all sorts and conditions of people are countless in our 21<sup>st</sup> century California context. The demographics of our diocese make it impossible for us not to be touched by people who have different values and cultures. Did you know that geographically, 40% of the households in our diocese speak a language other than English at home? We always have the option of isolating ourselves from our neighbor, but we all know this is not the call on our Christian lives. And such isolation causes us to miss the richness of diversity. This means we must become increasingly skilled at reconciliation and restoration, at being flexible and conversant with difference. We must develop from this moment of grace, a common culture of grace, where we not only forgive one another our differences, but we take one another into ourselves, as Christ has taken us into himself.

In a seemingly separate arena, it is not lost on me that we have just managed to put together the task force on marriage called for at our diocesan convention last fall. In the prayerful selection process and ensuing conversations with those we felt God was calling to this work, it became more and more apparent that there is much reconciliation work to be done in our diocese around the matter of human sexuality and marriage. We discovered a pervasive sense that we are not really listening and hearing one another in this conversation (and this was regardless of viewpoint). In our midst is the idea that there are winners and losers in this body of Christ around the matter of sexuality and blessing/marriage rites. This separation is not about the opinions held but about the relationships between us slowly distancing to the point of rupture -- unconsciously, unintentionally perhaps -- but breaking apart nonetheless, silently assuming no healing grace in the space between us.

Given these arenas of culture and sexuality presenting themselves in obvious and powerful ways as of late, the opportunity to invite Ron Claassen, D. Min., Director of the Center for Peacemaking and Conflict Studies at Fresno Pacific University, to join us for the clergy conference in February also emerged. To our clergy leaders, I hope you will join me in better learning how to lead our common mission of restoration, which I believe is so clearly at hand. God is doing something here, and we must all, lay and clergy, be faithful in holding fast in this moment of brokenness – and of grace – in which we now find ourselves.

There is much hard work to do in learning new skills of deep listening, respectful speaking, acceptance, just power-sharing, accountability, and most importantly, an intentional willingness of letting go of what is familiar, striving for the new creation of restored unity in Christ to which we are called. While we have studied the scriptures and developed the theology, the practical

strategy will only be achieved by trial and error. There is much to think through, mostly in examining ourselves and how we participate in the sin of racism (or any other 'ism' for that matter), thereby keeping whole groups of people isolated from the fullness of our common life. Each of our congregations, each of our lives, is a laboratory for reconciliation, restoration and for the living out of grace.

My first invitation to you is to look for the brokenness in your own life – and then live into the moment of grace that God is opening up for you in that space. As your bishop I pledge to do this myself and to remain steadfast in my commitment to a healthy diocese that has as a normal, common, natural part of its life, a culture of reconciliation, restoration and of grace. Diocesan leadership will continue this conversation, seeking in both word and action how we from all walks of life may be “built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God”, drawing others in to be fed and transformed by the reconciling presence of Christ. I ask your support and participation in this most basic Christian call, one requiring our very best efforts. Finally, I ask your prayers and support for Fr. Garza, his family and the people of Santa Maria Virgen. May we be reconciled, if now from afar, in this ministry of restoration.

With ever blessing of grace, peace and the abiding love of Christ,

+Bishop Mary