

(III)

THE CALL TO BE A BISHOP IN A NATIVE AMERICAN DIOCESE

Dear Friends:

It is a great honor for me to be with you and to be asked to be a part of this panel of bishops and to share a few of my experiences relating to the challenges of being a bishop in the Southwest for the last 21 years.

My diocese is unique in many ways. Except for the Diocese of Wilmington which is both in Delaware and a small portion of Maryland, the Gallup diocese is the only one that includes large portions of two states: Northwestern New Mexico and Northeastern Arizona. That is because of the Navajo Nation. When the diocese was established as the Native American Diocese of the USA in 1939 Pope Pius XII didn't want the Navajo Nation divided into two dioceses. Accordingly, the Diocese of Gallup is one of the largest geographically—55,000 square miles beginning just west of Albuquerque with the Laguna Indian Reservation and going all the way west to the Northern Rim of the Grand Canyon. Until the Diocese of Phoenix was established in 1969, the Gallup Diocese was 100,000 square miles and going all the way to the border of California.

The distances alone present great challenges but also the important fact that at least 53% of the Catholics are Native Americans or indigenous people from seven different tribes with different indigenous languages. This reality also makes the Diocese of Gallup the poorest in the USA and very dependent on outside funding in order to both survive and accomplish its mission. If it wasn't for the help we get from The Catholic Extension Society and the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions we would have closed our doors years ago.

During my first four years in Gallup, I was the Coadjutor bishop to Bishop Jerome J. Hastrich. In March of 1990, I became the Ordinary. I immediately moved the diocese into an in-depth strategic planning process in order to determine the needs of the various parts of the diocese, and, based on this year-long program of research and self-evaluation to develop a vision statement and six goals/challenges for our future. Allow me to list the six goals we have focused on since then.

- (1) Adult Religious Education
- (2) Lay Ministry/Leadership Formation
- (3) Adult Spiritual Formation
- (4) Evangelization
- (5) Cultural Sensitivity
- (6) Social Justice and Outreach.

For the purpose of brevity, I want to highlight two of these. First is Cultural Sensitivity. As a diocese we chose to embrace our multi-cultural heritage by encouraging individuals in the communities to share their cultural giftedness, thereby enriching the life and practices of the Church and generating a deeper sense of belonging. For example, we take inculturation very seriously and especially apply this principle through the cultural adaption of previous liturgical forms and also by encouraging representation from our diverse cultures on the Diocesan Pastoral Council and the other consultative bodies including: The Presbyteral Council, the Sisters' Council the Deacon Council and the Finance Council. Our

ministry of the permanent diaconate has been graced with a good number of Native American deacons, especially Navajo and Pueblo as well as Mexican-Americans.

This leads me to my second point: Lay Ministry Formation and Lay Leadership Formation. With this goal the diocese works at “promoting and empowering lay involvement in ministry and leadership in the Church that will result in collaboration and shared responsibility.”

The consultative bodies which I have mentioned above share a very important part of the decision making process of the diocese. I meet with each group four times a year. This involves a full day each time and with a prepared agenda. No major pastoral decision is made without my first bringing it to each consultative group. While this approach slows down the decision making process, it allows participation on the part of all who are interested and brings about real ownership. It is a big challenge! It calls everyone in the local ecclesial community to listening and dialoging at all levels, starting with local parish pastoral councils and in some cases deanery pastoral councils and finally ending with the Diocesan Pastoral Council which is the local Church in miniature through its diverse representation of the different areas of the diocese. At the end of each meeting I am called on to give a report of what has happened since the last meeting. This holds me to accountability to all in terms of my leadership and in terms of the implementation of pastoral decisions. During the question and answer period I would be ready to provide more details regarding this process.

After 21 years, what remains the greatest challenge? I would say without hesitation, that the on-going challenge is of reconciling the various models of the Church within the diocese with my own vision of Church. In decision making the key words are “persuasion” and “consensus-building” and “not “imposition.” That takes a lot of work! It is not uncommon for our Native American people to reach important decisions through their “talking circles” or “town hall meetings.” These gatherings may not necessarily be called “parish council meetings” but they achieve the goal of consensus around a decision needed to be made by the local parish.

The second big challenge results from the regular turn-over on the various consultative bodies by way of term limits. This makes it difficult to maintain a long-term sense of continuity. By way of example, if five members of the Diocesan Pastoral Council are replaced by new members around the same time, one feels as if there is a need to start all over again. Nonetheless, new participation brings refreshment and new life.

Allow me to conclude by reading the vision statement of the diocese entitled “Strengthen One Another,” which actually is my Episcopal motto.

We, the People of God in the Diocese of Gallup, believe that Christ’s teaching, given to us in the gospels, is the Word of God, and that he is “The Way, the Truth and the Life.” (John 14.6).

We are a people of many cultures, each distinctive in its heritage, coming together as one family in prayer and the Eucharist; a people living in faith, hope and love. With the Holy Spirit as our guide, we live in harmony with our neighbors and our earth.

United with Christ as our model, we are committed to the continuing growth and renewal of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Gallup. "For we are partners working together for God, and you are God's Field" (1 Cor. 3:9).

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