

## THE CHALLENGES OF THE CALL TO BE A BISHOP IN NORTH AMERICA TODAY

### (I)

#### THE CHALLENGES AND CALL OF OVERSIGHT

The invitation to speak of “The Call and the Challenge of the Bishop in North America” has challenged me to reflect on the root meaning of the term “bishop.” In whatever time or place, the bishop is the one who is called to exercise the ministry of *oversight*. My understanding of my own call and challenge, then, might be understood as vigilance, being alert, attentive to the vital forces in human life and in our ongoing history, in the wider world and, specifically, in this Local Church.

As I have pondered over this call and challenge, a very simple question has emerged: If my ministry is principally that of oversight, what is it that I see?

First, in my episcopal ministry in Los Angeles, what I see is diversity. We are likely the most linguistically, culturally, racially, ethnically, economically, and religiously diverse metropolis in North America, perhaps in the world. To give one concrete example of this, on any given Sunday, Mass is celebrated in approximately forty-two languages and dialects in this Archdiocese. Trying to respond to such diversity has been and remains one of the central challenges of my episcopal ministry. Each time I enter the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, I look, I see, the cornerstone on which are engraved the words of the prophet Isaiah: “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” When I look out on so many different people gathered in the Cathedral for Sunday Eucharist, I wonder: How do we welcome all these people with all their gifts so that we—member for member—can be and build the Body of Christ as a sacrament of reconciliation and peace in and to the world.

Second, what I see is vibrancy, movement, a people who, in the main, are looking and moving forward. In this I see an expression in our own time and place of the words of the first Franciscans who brought the Good News to the people of this land: *Siempre Adelante*: Always forward! Perhaps this movement of our people is enshrined in the Six Pastoral Initiatives that were endorsed by the delegates of our Archdiocesan Synod, men and women representing every sector of this Archdiocese in all its diversity. This three year process of prayer, dialogue, discernment and decision concluded (and just began!) in September 2003 with the endorsement of the following, which are now “particular law” for our Archdiocese: (1) Evangelization and “The New Evangelization”; (2) Establishing Structures for Participation and Accountability; (3) Ongoing Education and Formation: Youth; Young Adults; Adults; (4) Ministry and Leadership: Lay; Consecrated Life; Ordained; (5) Eucharist and Sacramental Living; (6) Social Justice: Living at the Service of God’s Reign.

To implement these Initiatives, we have established Pastoral Councils at the level of our Five Regions as well as an Archdiocesan Pastoral Council. When I am asked to express what I see for our future here, to articulate my vision of where we

are going, where we are moving, I say simply and in utter sincerity: “My vision is the vision that emerged from our Synod Delegates.”

One matter that I see as calling for particular attention, one which I find as a real challenge personally, is embedded in the Fifth Pastoral Initiative: Eucharist and Sacramental Living. For me the question is this: How do remain a truly Eucharistic Church with an increasing number of Catholics in our Archdiocese and a decreasing number of priestly vocations? For me, this question involves much more than simply assuring that a certain number of Masses are celebrated in each parish. Is it enough to say that we will remain a truly Eucharistic Church if we guarantee that at least one Sunday Mass in each parish in the Archdiocese? I have come to see that it calls for at least this, but so much more. Being and becoming a truly Eucharistic Church entails much more than assuring a certain number of ritual celebrations. It is rather more about the quality of liturgical celebration and about the life of a community being faithful not only to the Supper command to “Do this in memory of me,” but also to the “diaconal mandate” to do unto others “As I have one for you.”

Third, and finally, what I see day in and day out is the near-unspeakable suffering of so many of our people. When I was first ordained Bishop, I chose as my episcopal motto: “To Reconcile God’s People.” When I decided upon that motto, we were in the midst of incredible upheaval in the San Joaquin Valley with César Chávez and his efforts to organize the grape workers. There was enormous bitterness, anger, and divisions. The great majority of both growers and workers were Catholic. Both sides presumed that the Church would be on their side, not the other side. After that grueling battle for some 12 years, a little peace began to settle. I recall thinking at the end of those struggles that never in my life would I ever have to take so seriously: “To Reconcile God’s People.” Until the sexual abuse scandal broke. This has been far more difficult than the farm labor crisis of 1965 to 1977. When Saint Paul calls us to the “ministry of reconciliation” in First Corinthians, I now understand that he is describing gritty and nasty human divisions and animosities. His expression sounds great on a little Bible bookmark, but living out the ministry of reconciliation—which I see as central to the call of the Bishop—this bishop—in North America—is extraordinarily challenging.

Most recently, the form this ministry has taken in my life is that I go through many of my days meeting with the victims of sexual abuse—looking at them face to face—listening to their pain and seeing the pain written in their faces, the scarring at the heart of their stories. What I have come to see, especially in these later years of my episcopal ministry, is that the Body in all its magnificent diversity, in all its buoyancy and vibrancy—this Body of Christ which I am called and challenged to oversee and serve—is a Body still bearing wounds.

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