Address by The Right Reverend Thomas J. Brown, Bishop of Maine
to the 201st Annual Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Maine
Oct 18, 2020

On May 29th, 1920 the Reverend Charles Slattery left the rectory of Grace Church in Manhattan for the two-mile walk to Penn Station. He was coming home to Maine to preach the centenary sermon at Christ Church in Gardiner.

Rev. Slattery was a son of the Maine diocese and a preacher's kid. His father had been the rector at Saco; after Saco he worked with people in Rockland to found St. Peter's, and then again, St. Thomas in Camden.

In his centenary sermon at Christ Church, Rev. Slattery said:

"The Diocese, which now rounds out its first century, is a personality, with sorrow conquered, with honest achievement, with strong belief in its destiny, with faith in God's perpetual guidance.

...and...we pray...that those who serve the Church in Maine shall in turn make the Diocese a true servant to all people."

So, here we are, 100 years later and so much has changed.

Yet, we can still echo Rev. Slattery's assertion of who we are as a diocese.

We certainly have personality!

And we have conquered sorrow.

We have achieved great things.

We believe in our destiny.

We profess faith in God's perpetual guidance.

And we pray that the Diocese is a true servant to all people

Consider Rev. Slattery's words about the diocese as a personality.
As the diocese enters our third century, we *do* have a unique personality that is much tied to the personality of Maine itself. We see this as we face this global health crisis: There is little drama, abundant common sense, love for our neighbors, respect for our governor and health director, and regard for self-care—all precious gifts— which strengthened our willingness to change, pretty much overnight, and to be the church in a very different way.

The Diocese is a personality, Rev. Slattery said, and I believe he'd agree that it is as beautiful today as it ever was.

Have we, as a diocese, conquered sorrow, as Rev. Slattery proclaimed?

This year in particular we have witnessed much sorrow - in our communities, and across the world - with the coronavirus, racism and white supremacy, climate change, and the inability for many of us to be together to worship in person. I am personally very sad that I didn't get to every church in my first year, to learn more deeply the tenor and personality of *each* of our congregations.

It often seems like too much, such a sorrowful time this has been; but friends, God is with us in our sorrow and with Christ there is light to come after this and every darkness.

We need only look to the sorrow at Christ's crucifixion and what came from it. A cross has become for us a sign of hope and peace; the mystery of faith is that sorrow, suffering and death are never the end. We know, as did our ancestors in the faith, that God is at work, alongside us; and after sorrow, something new slowly (or sometimes quickly) emerges.

For the Diocese of Maine to conquer sorrow, we must commit to the spiritual work of embracing impermanence. The only sure thing - that permanent fixture in our lives - is Jesus Christ.

We say it is "On Christ the Solid Rock we stand" - because it is <u>in him</u>, and <u>through him</u> that we conquer sorrow and see how God makes all things new.

When the Reverend Slattery referred to "honest achievement" in his sermon, everybody knew what he was talking about—we had grown up, become independent, built a cathedral, established churches in every county.

When those in the future look back to our times now, what you have done in the past seven months may be even more acclaimed!

In March, we all had to adapt quickly. We went online, we used the telephone, we became fluent with Zoom and Facebook Live, we made videos, podcasts, and started Town Hall meetings. Our faithful clergy met with church members virtually and we all did everything in our power to remain connected.

We realized that our practice of being in-person and in-church wasn't the only way to be the body of Christ. We demonstrated that practicing faith doesn't depend upon our buildings.

It rings particularly true, then, that our convention theme is: "Nothing can separate us: Being the Body of Christ." This is lifted from St. Paul's hopeful proclamation in the 8th chapter of Romans, and it presses further, suggesting that nothing will stop us from engaging God's mission. And that is what we have seen in the Diocese of Maine - nothing has stopped you from serving your congregations, your communities, and from loving each other.

Let me pause here and emphasize: this digital pivot that came on so quickly is here to stay.

Even when there is a vaccine, or when the pandemic ends and we can re-gather without worry, some type of digital presence will be vital. As we have learned already in this digital pivot, there are opportunities to love and serve others beyond the traditional means and proximity.

As a sign of our commitment to helping you, the Diocesan Council approved the use of reserved funds so that all of our faith communities can apply for a grant of $2,000 to make this digital pivot. For some of our churches that's a drop in the bucket; for others, it represents the possibility of new life.

Why is leaning into this digital pivot so very important?

Consider the story of Madelyn and Wendell Howard. They're in their 90s. They have been pillars of their parish for decades, held every conceivable office, taught Sunday School, shoveled snow, counted money, and embraced newcomers. In the last few years it's been physically too much for them to get to church. They've missed it terribly. Thanks to this digital pivot, and a few tech-savvy relatives, the Howards are now able to attend church online every Sunday.

The pandemic, and our response to it, has changed lives. This is an achievement we're only beginning to comprehend.

In 1920 Reverend Slattery referenced a diocesan belief in our destiny.

Part of our destiny as the Diocese of Maine is to serve you. The only reason we, the diocesan staff and governing bodies, exist is to serve you, the people in our faith communities. Period.

We serve to help you get the resources you need so you can fulfill the call that God is giving you - YOUR destiny. That may come in the form of technical advice or teaching, coming to a vestry meeting via Zoom, or working with our governing bodies to shift the way we think.

And we want to serve you *better*, by evolving how we think and work. We are moving away from a focus on compliance, policy, and regulations, and towards customer service-focused, resource-based, innovation-oriented solutions to support you, our faith communities. We have welcomed a new director of communications, and you are continually blessed with the deep bench of wisdom and commitment of those who have served you for many years.

There is another destiny right now. The Diocese of Maine moves to confront racial injustice.

Confronting this is a foundational priority for the Episcopal Church. We see this in the Becoming Beloved Community curriculum and the Sacred Ground learning series. But, since the end of

May, and for me it was George Floyd's murder, our church and our society are now laser-focused on racial justice – this systemic issue has taken precedence.

Friends in Christ Jesus: Justice for all of God's people is our vision, and addressing the systemic racism and the white privileged structures is now part of who we are and what we do.

We'll learn, and lean into, each other's stories. Every single one of us has a story to tell about race, whether we are white, Black, Indigenous, or Persons of Color. And, our diocese with the Episcopal Church--we have a story too. We are a church who is historically English and colonial.

We flourished with the British Empire, and we have to tell a truth: oppression and assimilation are part of our history. The reckoning comes with work for each of us and for all of our congregations in Maine, for the whole diocese, and for the whole church.

To move toward that destiny of confronting racial injustice, we have faith in what Rev. Slattery stated in his sermon as “God’s perpetual guidance.”

Recently we launched a diocesan-wide commission that brings together a newly-formed Racial Justice Council, with the Committee on Indian Relations, and Episcopal Peace Fellowship; and they together will be a strong resource as we do this work. I implore you to start this work now. Talk with each other about race, about your own story. Dig into the work of uncovering what biases you may hold. Reach out to the Black, Indigenous and People of Color neighbors. And, there’s more. Consider how your congregation refers to the historical fact that all of us settled on land, harvested timber, and fished in waters that belonged to the Wabanaki and other tribes of people who were here long before 1820.

This work is not, and will not, be easy; nor should it be. It is deep and soul searching. Some of us are uncomfortable and scared; others of us are angry and tired. Yet all of us are here together and God is with us. In the same way that despairing about a new digital age will hinder our growth, so too will denying God’s urgent call for the Episcopal Church to repair the breach of racial injustice.

Diocese of Maine, you are a remarkable community, and I have never been so clear about a sense of call than the one I have toward you. Thank you for welcoming me, for continuing to teach me, and for showing me the holy and gorgeous truth that God’s nature—always—is to bring us from death into life. I pledge to do everything possible to be faithful, to listen, to learn, to love, and to lead. I can only do this with your prayers and your guidance and your participation..

That sermon of 100 years ago ended with a final sentence:

“To God we give thanks for the past, and to Him we pray for love and wisdom, that those who serve the Church in Maine shall in turn make the Diocese a true servant to all people.”

As we stand here, 100 years later, we too shall do this, with God’s help.