

Thanksgiving Has Come Early This Year

Walking in the light of the first cool, crisp mornings of the fall, I find myself thankful -- not just Gratitude-Journal-thankful for hot coffee, or work that I love, or even for health (though grateful I am) -- but grateful for the front-line workers and first responders who are tending to the spiritual needs and feelings of anxiety or disappointment or fear or rage that flare up in unexpected hot spots in the uncontained fires of the multivalent mess that we can only call "2020."

I am grateful for our leaders in the Church -- all our leaders, lay and ordained. Today I am especially thinking of our ordained leaders -- pastors, preachers, priests. Men and women called by God and the Church, raised up in local congregations, trained and coached in the larger church, deployed into hundreds of unique settings in Virginia. They serve in cities, suburbs, the country. They and their families have given themselves to Christ and his bride, the Church. They have vowed to serve as shepherds, prayer leaders, prophets, and teachers, and serve they do. They are on call 24/7 for the emergencies of whole communities, and even when things are quiet, they routinely work far more hours than their agreements provide. They are present in crisis and in celebration; they work in the hospital and the study and the chancel.

And now this. Now, the scramble from the beauty and dignity of Holy Week and Easter to the sudden need to convey all of that on Zoom or Facebook. Now, the need to reinvent pastoral care by remote. Now, the weekly uncertainty of regathering precautions and the weight of worry about balancing the deep desire for tangible sacramental life with the profound worry about the health -- even the lives -- of their flocks. Now, the plunge of the nation into superheated discourse on race and justice, and supercharged emotions over politics. Now, the crazy mix of the cohesion of loving congregations, the opportunity to experiment with new modalities, the need to plan for an unforeseeable future with unpredictable challenges and resources, and the stress of responding in love to the most stressed and anxious among us. Every wedding, every burial and memorial, every deferred confirmation, weighs upon them. This I know, because they will not complain, especially to their flock, but they will call to share their grief and sorrow on behalf of their people. Of course, clergy are not the only bearers of the burdens of this difficult season, but their burden is heavy.

To the clergy reading this: We bishops see you. We pray for you. We are here to listen to you and support you. If it is in our power to help, then we will do it.

And to the laity of the Church, the flock of Christ: We see and pray for you, too. We know that you share the stresses of educational and economic upheaval and a million other worries. And we ask your help in this: help us to uphold and sustain your parish clergy who now enter another stretch of demanding spiritual leadership. That's not to say that problems or disagreements, if there are any, should be swept under the rug, but rather that the truth must be spoken in love,

and the hearts of all should be guarded and protected. Let there be grace – the grace of time and space, the grace of appreciation and honor, the grace of companionship and laughter. Pastoring is one of those occupations with high rates of depression and burnout and worse, especially in times of societal trauma. The antidote is grace, and appreciation, and love. The antidote is remembering that we are not defined by the boundaries of doctrine or politics, but by our orientation toward the cross of Christ. The antidote is humming to ourselves: We have decided to follow Jesus; no turning back. . . The cross before us; the world behind us; no turning back.

Thanksgiving has come early this year. Your three bishops are grateful to your congregational leaders, and we tell them so, but it means much more when they hear it from you. We pray that they are going deaf from hearing it from you. May your love, your patience, and the grace of your support in these challenging times sustain them as they sustain you through the months to come.

And may God bless us all, every one.

Bishop Jennifer