

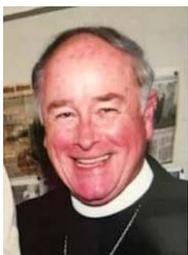
When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

[John 19:30]

Dear people of God in the Northeastern Ohio Synod,

I recently experienced a string of deaths of people who have played a significant role in my life. The presence of each one contributed greatly to shaping my ministry.

John Mann supervised my formation in ministry. He was the pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Canton, where I began serving, first doing my ministry field experience and then as mission developer of the synod's first Latino congregation.



Pastor Mann had a passion for the gospel, a commitment to social justice issues, a meticulousness concerning liturgy and sound preaching. All those were an inspiration to me. His love for the church catholic nurtured my enthusiasm for ecumenism.

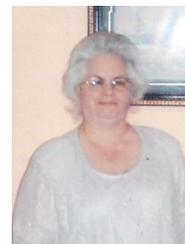
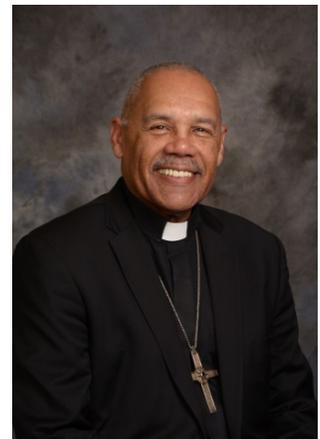
John Mann taught me to think in scriptural images. For everything that happens here on earth, there is some narrative in the Bible that speaks to the situation. To quote John Mann directly, "I believe that the Gospel must speak cogently to the powerful circumstances of daily life."

He was committed to tend to the spiritual needs of people as well, a constant presence at the bedside of those who were sick or dying. In short, ministry was his life. And though we didn't always see eye-to-eye, the lessons I learned from his ministry have been invaluable to mine.

Linda Bake was the president of the council of St. James Lutheran Church in Jewett, Ohio, one of the smallest congregations in our synod.

Though they have not had a full-time pastor in

years, it didn't deter Linda from keeping the congregation together and being a leading witness to the gospel in that poverty stricken community.



A few months ago, Linda was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and opted for no treatment, preferring instead to enjoy as much quality time as possible with her beloved husband, Abraham (yes – the coincidence was a running joke between us) and be prepared for her "promotion to glory" as she called it.

I frequently lift up St. James around the synod as a model of faithfulness, and Linda was the leader in setting the example. But she certainly did not die believing that her salvation was secured by her own doing. Her faith was not in herself, but in the Lord's mercy. Linda was not only an example on how to live a life of faith, but also how to die with confidence in God's promise. That was the greatest gift she left to those who knew her.

The same week as Linda Bake's death, my 101-year-old aunt **Rosa Viñals**, also entered into eternal rest. My aunt was like a surrogate

mother to me. When I was a child in Puerto Rico, I practically lived at their house, along with her husband, their four children and my grandparents. house.



I've used her as a sermon illustration often, because what I remember most about those visits was mealtimes. I can't remember a dinner where there weren't at least

eight people at the table, and often, there were a dozen or more. Some of those weren't family members. It seemed that anyone on the street who happened to be hungry at the time was a welcome guest at our table. And there always seemed to be enough, not only to go around, but for seconds as well. Until a dozen years ago or so, before her health began to decline, she still cooked for an army, even though there was only one other person in the household. Everyone who came through the door got fed. Every time I hear or sing the song, "A Place at the Table," it immediately invokes images of my aunt and her love of cooking.

These deaths coming in almost rapid-fire succession threatened to overwhelm me with grief. But as I think back over these last couple weeks, my sense of loss has been filled with hope.

We are midway through the season of Lent. Good Friday will soon be upon us. Each Good Friday, we are drawn to the scene of Mary watching her son hanging on the cross, his life slipping away. Anyone who has watched a loved one die can relate to her grief.

But what Mary didn't know at the time was that in a matter of three days that grief would be replaced by the inexpressible joy of the

Resurrection, and the world would be endowed with the gift of salvation for all who believe in God's son.

Because of that first Good Friday, we can now gather at the foot of the cross each subsequent Good Friday, not to grieve, but to strengthen and renew our faith. It was that cruel death that proved God's undying love for us.

Because of that first Good Friday, we have the gift of life eternal in the death and resurrection of Christ. A life that identifies us as children of the same Heavenly Father. A life filled with grace.

And for that we say, "Thanks be to God!"

May Christ be your peace,

+Bishop Abraham D. Allende