

January 4, 2012

**A Pastoral letter to the Clergy and Laity of the Diocese of the Rio Grande**

To all God's beloved in the Diocese of the Rio Grande, who are called to be saints:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

As we enter a New Year to embrace new beginnings and envision a hopeful future for our personal lives, our families, our church communities, and our Diocese, I am blessed in being able to embrace each one of you with the unconditional love of God in Christ Jesus. In this New Year let us pray together for our mutual steadfastness and faithfulness in these times of change and uncertainties. The recent news from Vatican City announcing that Pope Benedict XVI has named my predecessor Father Jeffery Neil Steenson to lead the new "Personal Ordinariate of the Chair of St. Peter" has evoked in some a sense of disillusionment, betrayal, sadness, and confusion. May I offer several reflections that I pray will be spiritually beneficial as you begin to learn more about the nature and purpose of this unprecedented invitation to disaffected Anglicans and Episcopalians.

First, this invitation comes as a gracious pastoral gesture from the Vatican to those who, with conviction and personal faith, can neither live nor practice their Christianity comfortably in the household of the Episcopal Church or the Anglican Communion. As you are well aware, many current controversies usually are cited by the media for these disaffections. These include the ordination of women as priests and bishops, the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, the issue of same gender blessings, and the ordination of qualified gay persons. Yet as our Christian Church history clearly has shown us, time and time again ours is neither the first nor the last age to experience disaffection among Christians over evolving contemporary controversial issues. What is important to remember and embrace in our faith tradition is that in reality the Church of Jesus Christ never is divided, even by unresolved theological issues of the day, but always is united in One Lord, One Faith, and One Baptism, as we affirm in our baptismal covenant. Differences among Christian denominations and ecclesiologies, whether theological, doctrinal, ethical/moral, or disciplinary perspectives, have their historical roots in the controversies of the early Churches of Sts. Peter and Paul. And yet, Christ's Catholic Church continues its witness throughout the ages being bound, not by differences, but by a single shared mission and life-giving Gospel. We should never be disillusioned by disaffections, but rather become more conscious of how, with integrity, we can learn from others and continue to love, respect, and live with our neighbors, despite our personal or communal differences.

Second, all those who feel the need to leave the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion go with our blessings, prayers, and abiding love. With humility, understanding, and a trusting faith, we must always be generous in spirit and gracious in manner, praying that those laity and clergy, like Fr. Steenson and others, have peace of mind and clear conscience living their faith in another Christian household. Our 77-million-member Anglican fellowship, which has its apostolic historic roots in the Church of England and the See of Canterbury, which originated with St. Augustine in the year 597, will continue to witness to a uniquely vibrant

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Christian tradition as we have received it, and as we, the whole people of God, both clergy and laity, in church governance and polity, continue to discern it. We are a Conciliar Church, inspired and formed by our English Reformation, which chose religious freedom and said “no” to the Roman curia and Papal authority. Today our Episcopal House of Bishops and House of Deputies are alive, well, and faithfully living out the Gospel imperatives proclaiming Christ Jesus as living Lord of the universal Church. We, laity and clergy, humbly rely on the guidance of the Holy Spirit in renewing our doctrine, discipline, and worship. Our life in communion is shaped in ways deemed Godly and appropriate by General Convention, as well as life-giving for all people in the age in which we now live. The catholic tradition, as Anglicanism has understood and embraced it, is a living tradition of Christ’s redemptive love, and not a cherished relic or practice of a past age. Again, a study of Christian history clearly shows us that what may have been normative in faith and doctrine in one age may not be normative for another. The gifts and charisma of our Anglican heritage have been and continue to be essential parts of the One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ. After discussing the Church’s controversies of the day, a wise and progressive Roman Catholic Cardinal once said to me in Rome: “Padre Michele, the Anglican Church’s struggles with change is the wind behind the sails of the Roman Church.” With every change comes a great personal price. Our Anglican Archbishop Michael Ramsey once commented that change was the spiritual burden and charisma the Anglican tradition carried. Of course, as a convinced Anglican who lived in Rome for eighteen years, I agree. Church history has proven this in other controversies time and again.

As your Bishop and Chief Pastor I write to you out of my concern for both your emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Remain steadfast and faithful to the Gospel as you have received it within this Episcopal-Anglican household of faith. Our future is God’s future, and as Lord of the Church, Jesus will bring into being what humanity needs in every age. If you are experiencing a sense of betrayal, sadness, confusion or if you are questioning your faith tradition, I pray that it gives way to trust that ultimately God’s will always prevails, and that, in God’s good time, the Church’s definitive future will be revealed.

I also want to share the joy, hope, and love I have experienced not only within our growing and changing Diocese, but within the entirety of the Episcopal Church. We are God’s people determined to spread the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and this is experienced through the caring pastoral work of thousands of our Churches throughout the United States. We are experiencing growth at all levels; young families are increasingly joining congregations; college students and young adults are rediscovering the excitement and grace of a lively faith; displaced and outcast people are feeling welcomed and coming to our communities; and our national and international Church’s mission and outreach ministries are touching the lives of millions. In short, the Episcopal Church is alive and growing. We wish our brothers and sisters peace; however, for me and so many others it is a blessed and exciting time to be an Episcopalian.

With my heartfelt gratitude for your prayers, be assured that you all are in my daily prayers, and I wish you every good blessing in this New Year.

Sincerely in Christ Jesus,

Your Bishop,

+ Michael