

Bishop's Address to Diocesan Convention February 22, 2008

If you ever take a close look at a deacon's or priest's ordination certificate, you will note that there is a blank space on the form that is to be filled in with which year it is after the consecration of the ordaining bishop, as on my own priest's certificate, which states, "in the nineteenth year of our consecration, assistant bishop of Texas, Anselmo Carral." It is a fall back, I suppose, to the way that English laws have long been recorded, in that they are registered by the year of the reign of the monarch in which they receive royal assent. I am ever so thankful that now I have finally gotten to the point where certificates I sign say "second year" instead of "first." I am not in danger of being a boot camp dropout.

Up at Camp Mitchell at Winterstar last week someone asked me what I do every day. A lot of my work involves listening: listening to staff or wardens or members of the clergy. A fair percentage of people want my word of advice or my leadership or my ear. On a few occasions they probably want my head on a pike. The admiration I have for the twelfth bishop of Arkansas, Larry Maze, and for the eleventh and the tenth and on back to the first, Bishop Polk, has only grown. We gather today on the shoulders of the work of so many generations before us who felt that the Episcopal Church's witness was a necessary and vital part of a healthy society. We must never forget that past because it is the foundation on which we build.

This past year your prayers have humbled me. I cannot express to you the depth of my profound thanks for those prayers and your support. I realize that I am not alone in exercising the responsibilities of this office; I am doing so only in the context of your hard work and your proclamation of the good news. There are four orders of ministry in this church, and by far the most important one is the ministry of the laity. I pledge you my continued support in your work.

Some people might tell us that being a bishop, particularly in these challenging days in the Anglican Communion and American society, is not an office that anyone ought to undertake: too many competing demands, and it often seems that problems only, not rejoicings, come across the bishop's desk. But I discovered in my life a long time before you elected me to this office that there is a way to be a good leader even in the midst of conflict, and that way is to decide to be creative and have some fun. I daily pray for the inspiration to get off the treadmill of trying to do things the same old way and expecting new results. I will focus on strengths, both personally and the strengths of this amazing diocese. I will spend my time working with motivated people who want to see signs of resurrection in our midst and who are willing to be transformed. I will leave it to you to do the things that you do better than I. I firmly believe that in being such a person myself, then the congregations in the church in Arkansas and you as individual lay people and priests and deacons will also be healthier and happier, whether we see each other once a week or once a year. As long as I enjoy being your bishop and as long as my staff enjoy their work (which they tell me they do, by the way), I think you will enjoy being a part of this community of faith as well. And as long as you enjoy being a part of this community, others outside the church will begin to experience good news.

Part of what I am called to do is to encourage you, and there are a few specific ways in which I want to do so today.

First, at this convention you will be asked to consider changes to our diocesan constitution and canons. Some proposals are technical wording changes that clarify who we are as a church. They come suggested by chancellors across the Episcopal Church in their effort to give our canons some consistency, and I encourage their adoption. The proposed change to the constitution you will discuss about representation in diocesan convention is of more immediate interest to many of you. I simply want to remind you that the church in its history has had a wide variety of ways that people have gathered together to do the business of the church, and no matter what decision you make about representation at diocesan convention, the church will continue to move forward. The fact that we gather as a community of all orders—laity, priests, deacons, and bishop—to discuss how we are governed is a gift that other parts of the Anglican Communion would do well to emulate. I encourage you to have a fruitful discussion and realize that our proclamation of the good news will remain the same no matter how we organize ourselves for business.

Next, I mentioned earlier that I have so much respect for the hard work that Larry Maze did as our twelfth diocesan bishop. I welcome him back to an active role in this diocese as the bishop's vicar at St. Mark's Church in Little Rock. He represents a line of faithful bishops that goes back 170 years, including the groundbreaking episcopate of assistant bishop Edward Demby, the first African-American bishop in the Episcopal Church, who served faithfully in this diocese from 1918 until 1939. To honor the work of both Bishop Maze and Bishop Demby, a committee headed by Bill Norman is in the process of raising money for official portraits. I encourage you to support this effort financially.

Next, I want to report on the results of an action taken by the last diocesan convention, when it requested the reactivation of the diocesan day school commission. Here is what has happened since convention. The wording of the canon that originally inaugurated the day school commission seems better suited to an age in which the primary purpose of a commission would be to regulate parish-based day schools. The committee on constitution and canons has the first of what I guess will probably be a series of suggested changes in that canon. I urge you to support the change. The need that we have in this decade is to find ways to publicize and encourage the work of the varying schools that we have across the state. I have called together representatives of the schools in central Arkansas, and we are now working on ways to share with the public our common mission and unique gifts. A healthy system of Episcopal schools welcoming students from many backgrounds is a sign to the people of this state that we are just as concerned with our future as we are with our past.

And next, after a year in which we took a break from having formal gatherings to discuss the calls that people feel to a variety of ministries in the church, I will soon be announcing a resumption of Hearing a Call conferences. We can resume the work of raising up the next generation of ordained servants and leaders, as well as helping lay

people better discern the absolutely vital, and varied, ministries that every Christian has. I especially want to encourage young people who feel called to ordained ministry. Being a priest is not necessarily a second or third career; it can just as easily be a vocation for someone graduating from college.

People are religious creatures. We want to believe in something greater than ourselves and our individual day-to-day lives. America has been through at least three events in its history that we call Great Awakenings, times when people found God moving in their lives in a new way. I think we may be on the verge of another one, and this time it is going to be among young people who want something more profound and with deeper meaning than the common forms of religious fervor recently prevalent in this society. Young people want to be transformed and are looking for ways in which they can be participants in cultural and societal transformation. Using our ancient Christian language, we would say that the young are looking for resurrection.

A healthy church should be doing so as well. We need the transformation that resurrection will bring. We need young people in our midst who will transform our lives, who will remind us that it is time to become concerned about the environment, who will perhaps shame us with our preoccupations with war and spending, who will encourage us, for example, to respond much more actively when natural disasters strike than has been our custom. Resurrection undergirds how we see ourselves and how we see and treat others. Our call is to discover our own conversion and to share that good news. Even if sometimes we don't realize it, we have a message of a better way to live that so many people are hungry for, whether they realize it or not. To be more specific to our own situation, there are a lot of Episcopalians in Arkansas who do not yet know it. Our calling is to open the door and welcome them home.

I am firmly convinced that if we feel we have nothing to share with others, we will continue to decline in numbers and ministry. Poverty kills. On the other hand, if we feel that we have something good to share, we will find ourselves alive and growing. If we believe that everyone in our towns and neighborhoods is already in church, in a generation we will be out of business. On the other hand, if we believe that there are people who are seeking authentic expressions of Christianity, we will be building new churches. If we believe that worship is something to be endured each week, we will remain hungry for something transcendent to fill the void. On the other hand, if we are committed to the truth that worship is a transformative experience that demands our constant attention, we will be fed, and more importantly, we will feed others who hunger and thirst. It is our choice and God's grace, not any outside force, that will determine whether or not the church in Arkansas flourishes in the next generation.

If we believe that young adults and youth are God's gift to us, then we will involve them in every aspect of our common life, and in so doing we will begin to repopulate our church with the next generation of followers of the risen Christ. If we believe that our checkbooks are a reflection of our priorities, then we as congregations will spend money to be in relationship with the communities in which we are located. If we believe that true treasure is something other than that which moth and rust consume, then we as

individuals will start giving away at least 10% of our personal income as a sign of our belief. And if we believe that resurrection is a current reality, then we will treat everyone who approaches us as if he or she is the embodiment of the risen Christ.

Our congregations across the state are involved in what must be a thousand different activities each week, ranging from feeding the hungry to cleaning up churches after worship. I commend each of you in your work. I encourage each of you to join me in focusing on worship, on good clergy and lay leadership, on attracting new people to the church, and becoming involved in our communities.

This focus is why the diocesan budget this year spends money on redeveloping our congregation in Paragould. It is why we continue to spend money in Bentonville for what I hope tomorrow will become the newest official mission of the Episcopal Church in Arkansas. It is why I will appoint a task force to get us ready to raise the money needed to build new church buildings in communities where there is a need for an Episcopal congregation, for if we do not build new churches we will not be an effective Christian presence twenty years down the road. It is why we have on staff a full time ministry developer for young adults and youth, a full time communications director, and a part time director of ministry education who will work to prepare people to share good news. How we fund the budget for the work of the church in Arkansas was not changed simply to save money, but rather so that we can get serious about stewardship and transformation.

I hope you will focus as well on this vital mission of the church. I am committed to it as long God allows me to be your bishop. I want us to share a vision of who we are and who we can become. Here is how I put it into words that I hope we can all remember and be guided by in each decision we make as individuals and as congregations:

The Episcopal Church in Arkansas:

We proclaim the transforming power of Christ's resurrection in worship and relationship.

This is the message that we will spread across the state. You will see it in print. You will hear it on radio and podcasts. You will see it in a redesigned diocesan website. And I hope to see it on your congregational websites and advertising as well. We will share our experience of the risen Christ in worship: in word, sacrament, song, prayer, preaching, and outreach. Not one element is unimportant. We will share our experience of the risen Christ in relationship as we welcome as a brother or sister in Christ anyone who walks in our doors or whom we encounter in the carpool line, and at the work site, and at school, and at the retirement center. When we forget our brothers and sisters, we as a church are diminished.

This next generation is eager for something authentic. The age of plastic is coming to an end. People of every age are hungry for true relationship. People are thirsty for transcendent worship. We can be the church that gives true food and drink. And if I as your bishop have anything to do with it, we will.

As I said earlier, you humble me with your prayers and support, and those prayers are hopefully transforming you and me and our relationship with one another. I pray that we will likewise transform the church so that things which were cast down will be raised up, and things which have grown old will be made new, and everything will be brought to perfection in the presence of the risen Christ.