

*Theological Reflection for the House of Bishops, September 2010*

I've been asked by the Planning Committee of the House of Bishops and the Curriculum Committee of the College for Bishops to reflect this morning on what God is up to in our midst regarding same gender relations, especially in reference to my own context in the Diocese of Tennessee, and to point toward the Scriptural foundation for what I think God's action is about. I am one of two bishops asked this morning to do this for our particular dioceses. The reflection takes place with the context of presentations to this House concerning concerns about policy in regard to immigration and undocumented workers. A daunting task. *For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?* (Isaiah by way of St Paul). *"But"*, St Paul says, *"we have the mind of Christ"* (1 Cor. 2:16). More about that later.

The Diocese of Tennessee covers Nashville and the Middle Tennessee region, sometimes called the "buckle on the Bible Belt", a conservative place but also a diverse place with a substantial immigrant presence and folk with many different answers to the social questions of our day, including same sex relations. The Diocese of Tennessee has worshipping communities that include a Sudanese congregation that nests at one of our Anglo parishes; a blended congregation that along with Anglos includes a majority of Karen refugees from Myanmar; a Korean congregation with a substantial Hispanic ministry and a number of Hispanic members; as well as an informal congregation called the "Church in the Yard", a ministry to homeless Hispanic persons in Nashville, hosted by our oldest African-American congregation and supported by a number of other churches including an ecumenical presence. The Diocese of Tennessee also includes gay and lesbian members who contribute to our life together, a sign of social as well as cultural diversity.

I think it's fair to say in the midst of a great deal of difference within the diocese, that support for the social shifts in regard to same sex relations that we have been exploring for many

years in our Church and in this House is by no means unanimous in our diocese, or even capable of commanding the support of a majority of our leadership. There are substantial reservations among our people concerning same sex blessings, with varying sources. Some are Scriptural in nature, others concern the traditional Christian moral consensus, while others are rooted in concern for our Anglican Communion relationships (which are not an abstraction but right at our front door). Folk who support same sex blessings are not of one mind about their meaning. Different people are concerned about different things. In our context in Tennessee, we're acutely aware that there is no consensus within our society about same sex relations, and predictions about where our society is going in the future seem neither inevitable or indeed pertinent to what we must do *now*.

What seems *most* pressing to *most* people in the Diocese of Tennessee, if I can generalize, is the need to remain together as a diocese and to pursue a common life in the midst of difference. This is something that I've held up to the diocese, and felt support for, and this fact has helped to create some trust. We've made a decision to do this, though we know it will be hard work, and that our energy and enthusiasm for it cannot be taken for granted and will need to be refreshed. Here is where Scripture speaks most loudly to me, in two texts. First, Ephesians 4:1-3, a text you know well: *"I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"*. How easily these words roll off the tongue, but how demanding they are for our life together as a Christian community. "Humility": close cognate of the word "humiliation". If you've been doing this work as a bishop and not yet experienced some humiliation, then just keep working on it. "Patience": that's a word that comes from the Latin root, "suffer", which gives us a further idea of how strenuous this call is. "Love": well, we preachers and pastors all know about this because we learn about it at the foot of the Cross. Finally, the "bonds of

peace” are strong ones of attachment, not easily or unilaterally severed, and which may also seem to pinch and chaff, depending on where the believer is.

Second, Galatians 6:2: “*Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ*”. Being together in the midst of difference over things that seem very important, even foundational, to people on both sides of an issue, is taxing work, a way in which we bear each other’s burdens. It’s easy to differ when the matters are not foundational. Being together as a Church, as a diocese, in the midst of this discussion, comes at a price. Again, these words are easy to say but the reality is different. I’m conscious in all humility that the burden I bear is by no means the heaviest that is being borne by folk in the diocese, and that others are bearing with me and that this is a grievous burden to them. Yet being able to perceive the presence of Christ within those with whom we disagree is a source of joy, perhaps unexpected joy at times, and is I believe part of fulfilling not only the law of Christ but also of sharing the mind of Christ that Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians.

I think, for this moment in the life of the Diocese of Tennessee, that this is the call, and that this is what God is doing in our little bit of the world in this issue. In this issue and others, I try to let these two texts interpret *me*, and point the way forward, as I continue my work and try to build up the Body of Christ.