



DIOCESE OF FORT WORTH THE BISHOP'S OFFICE



Letter to the Priests, Deacons, Consecrated Religious, and the Baptized Faithful
of the Diocese of Fort Worth

January 28, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

Recent news articles have compelled me to write this letter to you, the priests and people of our Diocese, regarding Father Richard Kirkham's resignation and his subsequent attempts to tarnish my ministry in the Fort Worth Diocese.

In June 2018, I asked Father Richard Kirkham to resign his office as pastor of St. Martin de Porres Church. This was not a request that I took lightly in any way. After a very difficult meeting with me and other diocesan officials, Father Kirkham did resign. Also, at my request, Father Kirkham went to a facility for a complete evaluation of his health so that together we could discern what ministry he might one day exercise in the Diocese. I took these steps because I had come to believe that Father Kirkham needed to take a step back from ministry. I had previously issued him a formal rebuke for dishonesty, and he had also acknowledged to me that there were issues that he needed to address. This was especially apparent in light of the deeply disturbing letter he sent to a priest from the Dallas Diocese which contained many lewd communications they shared over drinks.

After resigning his office and traveling out of state to begin the evaluation of his health, Father Kirkham regretted his decision and sought to withdraw his resignation. I could not in good conscience allow Father Kirkham to return to his former parish or to exercise any priestly ministry at that time. As a result, I requested that he complete his evaluation in anticipation of reviewing those findings with him in due course, but Father Kirkham opted not to do so. Instead, Father Kirkham elected to appeal his resignation to the appropriate authorities in Rome, a process to which he is entitled under canon law.

If the matter had ended there, then Father Kirkham's appeals would have taken place in the usual manner. One way or another, the dispute over his resignation would have been resolved according to the norms of justice in the Church under canon law. But instead, Father Kirkham went further. He refused to leave the rectory of his former parish and continued to occupy church property to which he had no right. He organized public support for his insubordination and began a campaign of public resistance to my leadership of the Diocese of Fort Worth, and in doing so, Father Kirkham deliberately misrepresented the details of this matter. And throughout that process, he regularly deceived other people about the true nature of his dispute with me and the reasons for my decisions about his ministry.

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I have remained silent about most of the details of this matter for two reasons. First, I wanted the Church's own internal process of resolving disputes to have ample time to work as it is designed to do. And second, I wanted the civil legal matters between Father Kirkham and both myself and the Diocese to be resolved according to the law. But now that Father Kirkham and his allies in the group calling itself FRK Advocates have gone public with a scurrilous and defamatory campaign against me, I believe it is appropriate to reveal more information about the true nature of this situation.

Father Kirkham asked the Holy See to overturn his resignation as pastor of St. Martin de Porres. The Congregation for the Clergy refused to do that and upheld the legal validity of his resignation. Father Kirkham then appealed to the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura—the Church's supreme court. They, in turn, confirmed the validity of his resignation. Father Kirkham has exercised his final right of appeal, and we are awaiting that judgment. But based on the details of this dispute, I am confident that his resignation will once again be upheld.

Sadly, while exercising his right to appeal his resignation to Rome, Father Kirkham has also engaged in several forms of harassment, intimidation, and willful disobedience to every attempt I have made to find a path forward for him. Among the ways he has compounded his original mistakes is to engage in legal disputes with the Diocese over his residence at the St. Martin de Porres rectory and with me personally by filing a civil lawsuit for defamation. Father Kirkham ultimately dismissed his lawsuit regarding the rectory on the eve of what was to be a second trial over that subject—he previously lost in a lower court and had appealed that decision. And late last night, Father Kirkham dismissed his defamation lawsuit—roughly one week before the court was set to hear arguments as to why his lawsuit should be dismissed.

Given his defeats in recourse to Rome and the dismissal of his civil lawsuits, Father Kirkham is losing his fight to disparage me and to disobey my decisions. That leaves Father Kirkham and his supporters only with the court of public opinion, and so the FRK Advocates have posted a video statement on their website which they believe somehow demonstrates that I am unfit to fulfill my ministry as Bishop of Fort Worth and which they hope will so humiliate me that I will relent in my determination to govern this Diocese in accordance with the doctrine and discipline of the Catholic Church. But they have misjudged both me and this situation.

Please know that I categorically deny the salacious comments attributed to me. And know that I am deeply saddened that those who would seek to undermine me and the mission of the Church would resort to taking advantage of a vulnerable person. Regardless of their abuse, and without regret or hesitation, I stand by the many decisions I have made over the past few years with regard to Father Kirkham, and I remain secure in my determination that he cannot at this time have any priestly ministry in the Church.

Except for the public effort of Father Kirkham and the FRK Advocates to depict me as unworthy of my office, I would never have provided this much information about the details of what should have remained a private matter between a bishop and his priest. But after the baseless public assault on my character, I had no choice but to share with all the faithful of the Diocese of Fort Worth a more complete explanation of what has gone so terribly wrong in the life of a man, Father Kirkham, who is still loved and respected by many of his former parishioners.

As I write these words, I have recently concluded a trip to Rome with the other bishops of Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. These last days have been for me a great consolation. The unity of the Church in love, the clarity of the Gospel in truth, and the beauty of the Christian life in hope have been brought into bright relief by our meetings with Pope Francis and our time together praying in the great basilicas of Rome, especially those of Saints Peter and Paul. Throughout this time all of the faithful in our Diocese have been in my heart, including Father Kirkham.

Having before my eyes only the good of the Church and the salvation of souls, I pledge to you that I am doing everything possible to fulfill my duties to teach, sanctify, and govern the Diocese of Fort Worth which was entrusted to my care on the day of my ordination as your Bishop. I remain firm in my promises of obedience and celibate chastity relying upon the Grace of God. After consultation with the Cardinals and other officials who assist the Holy Father in guiding the Church and having been affirmed by them in my ministry, I remain steadfast in my confidence that we are on the right road, which for disciples of the Lord Jesus is always the Way of the Cross.

I am,

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

+ Michael F. Olson

+Michael F. Olson
Bishop of Fort Worth