



CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF FORT WORTH
THE BISHOP'S OFFICE



To All Priests, Deacons, Seminarians, Religious Women and Men
and All the Lay Faithful of the Diocese of Fort Worth

July 19, 2019

Dear Friends in Christ,

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

On June 3, 1994, I was ordained to the priesthood for our blessed diocese, and then on January 29, 2014, I was ordained bishop for service in this local Church where I have spent nearly all my adult life. In the 20 years between the two ordinations, I served in several parishes, worked as vicar general for my immediate predecessor, and for more than five years was rector of Holy Trinity Seminary at the University of Dallas. Prior to my priestly ordination, my education and formation included service apostolates in several parishes throughout the twenty-eight counties of North Texas that compose our diocese.

All of those experiences have helped me to come to know many of you and for many of you to come to know me, for which I am grateful. Our shared experiences have prepared me to understand the unique situation of the Church in North Texas, and in the five and a half years since I was ordained to the ministry of pastoral oversight here, I have worked to the best of my ability to summon all of us to an ever-deeper conversion to Jesus Christ through the obedience of faith in His Gospel, which is “the power of God unto salvation to everyone who has faith” (Romans 1:16).

In recent months, objections have been raised about some of my decisions, and a few in the diocese have even called for me to resign or be removed by the Holy See because they object so strongly to the way in which I have fulfilled my responsibilities as your bishop. I write to you now, both to acknowledge the hurt these people feel and to call attention to everyone that in my ministry as the shepherd of the diocese, my first duty is to be a witness to Jesus Christ: the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Among the most important of my responsibilities is the discernment of how the gifts of both individuals and communities within the diocese are best deployed for the common good and the building up of this local Church. I regret the disappointment some now feel in the way I have exercised this office of oversight, but I pledge to you that my constant labor is for the increase of faith, hope, and love among each and all who are part of this spiritual family.

Two cases in particular of which you may be aware involve the status of San Mateo Mission and the ministry of Fr. Richard Kirkham. Some years ago, I discovered that although San Mateo Mission is a

consecrated place of divine worship, it is not and never has been a canonically established parish; rather, it is simply a chapel-of-ease, which is part of our St. Patrick Cathedral. Because of both present and future needs, I determined after extensive consultation with those within the diocese as well as with canon lawyers that regular celebration of Mass could not continue at San Mateo and that other changes needed to be made for the common good. This decision was then appealed to Rome by some parishioners who wanted things at San Mateo not to change.

Then last summer, for several serious personnel reasons, I asked Fr. Richard Kirkham to resign as pastor of St. Martin de Porres and work with me to be certain that he is able to continue in active ministry. In June 2018, Fr. Kirkham did resign as pastor of St. Martin de Porres, but then later he regretted that decision and sought to reverse it by appealing to Rome. Filing such an appeal was his canonical right in accordance with Church law. But then rather than wait for the appeal to be decided, a group of hurt and disappointed parishioners began to disrupt life in that parish and elsewhere in the diocese, thus bringing discord where there should be peace.

Both appeals have now been decided by the appropriate office in Rome, and in both cases, my decisions were upheld by the Holy See; namely that San Mateo is not, nor ever has been, a parish and that Fr. Kirkham ceased to be the pastor of St. Martin de Porres in June 2018. I am now working to establish new arrangements for San Mateo and to find a path back to active and suitable ministry for Fr. Kirkham.

Though the possibility of one further appeal exists in each case, I believe that I acted according to the law of the Church and in the best interests of the Diocese of Fort Worth. In my ministry as your bishop I always welcome the supervision and guidance of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, just as all priests and parishes in this diocese should welcome mine.

My hope and prayer is that everyone who has been affected by these and other disputes will now return to a full and zealous commitment to the goal that unites us all: Fulfilling the Great Commission given to us by the Lord Jesus. One essential way in which we lead others to saving faith in Christ the Lord is by our love for and communion with Christ and with each other. That love and unity come not from us, but from the Holy Spirit who is poured into us at our Baptism, strengthened in us at our Confirmation, restored in us at every Confession, and perfected in us by every worthy sharing in the Most Holy Eucharist.

Serving you as priest and bishop is the greatest joy of my life, and I make the words of St. Paul to the Philippians my own words to you: “If there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Philippians 2:1-2).

Praised be Jesus Christ. Now and forever!



+Michael F. Olson
Bishop of Fort Worth