

## **The Rev. Dr. Michael Louis Vono**

*1. The DRG is a geographically massive and culturally diverse Diocese, with a combination of urban and rural/frontier congregations. How might you apply your experience to our situation?*

From my own observation of the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe and in hearing from colleagues who minister in other large Dioceses, the central challenge seems to be the need for personal warmth, concern, pastoral affection and intimate care for clergy and laity who find themselves in the large and often impersonal bureaucratic system necessitated by the size of the Diocese. Pastoral care of clergy and parish communities is I think essential to the spiritual health and wellbeing of the whole Diocese. Pastoral intimacy, especially through the ministry of the episcopacy, helps eliminate the sense of isolation and feelings of being a mere statistic in any large Diocese. This has been my experience in the Convocation, which geographically and culturally parallels your situation in Rio Grande. Effective and timely communications are also extremely important, as well as establishing a public presence of witness and a sense of common vision, identity and mission in Christ, along with the nurture and growth of new congregations.

What excites me particularly about the Diocese of Rio Grande is the broad spectrum of people involved, the challenging work that needs to be done, and the fact that despite your differences you are united in the desire to build consensus and seek reconciliation. During my years of priestly witness and pastoral care I have always encouraged and enabled a strong mutual ministry of collaboration between clergy and lay people. I believe that I have the necessary experience and spiritual gifts to assist the Diocese of Rio Grande in meeting some of its challenges.

*2. Provide an autobiographical sketch of your personal and spiritual journey, including your rule of life.*

My spiritual journey began as a young boy in grammar school. By God's grace throughout my youth I had a clear sense of vocation. I believed God was calling me to be a Priest. Curiously, even though I did not grow up in a very religious nor regular church going family, nevertheless I consciously began recognizing in my young soul, heart and mind a profound and growing love, need and desire for God. As a confident child I told all my friends that I wanted to be just like Jesus, caring for and serving many people. In Grammar School I was the one who loved organizing the yearly Halloween party for all the kids in the neighborhood, playing priest with my friends, conducting funerals for dead birds which we would occasionally find, and holding church services in my parents' home basement distributing cookies to my friends as part of the Eucharist. My family tells these stories noting that today I still love bringing many people together. After Grammar and Jr. High School my sense of direction and spiritual life continued to mature. In my adolescent years I chose seminary education and training for ordained ministry. This long spiritual journey of formation throughout high school and college seminary, graduate and post-graduate seminary studies, resulted in fifteen years of formal theological education and pastoral training for ordained ministry. I've been spiritually inclined to nurture a disciplined religious life in Christ Jesus and experience Christ's compassion, joy and fulfillment through the church's ministries both in loving and serving the needs of diverse peoples, particularly the poor and marginalized. My rule of life includes daily prayer, spiritual reading, study, exercise and maintaining good physical health, and annual monastic retreats. Love of God's people and honoring God's creation brings me great personal happiness and fuels my spiritual fire.

Serving in differing social and cultural contexts both in the United States and Europe I have strived to be a faithful pastoral leader and through the gifts of the Spirit a wholesome example for all God's people working in progressively more responsible ministries as Curate, Missioner, Vicar and Rector. Today as Rector of an international church whose vibrant ministries include an active Latin

American community, large refugee day center, supervising two growing missions, participating in parish life and actively involved in the governance of our Convocation as well as in ecumenical and interfaith groups, I sense that I am ready to offer more of myself to Christ's Church. This is what now informs and inspires my ministry. I believe that the wider community's discernment will help clarify if I am a suitable candidate for Episcopal ministry embodying the necessary charismatic gifts and talents arising out of many wonderfully challenging years of administrative and pastoral experience specifically grounded in parish and diocesan ministry.

*Preamble: Since conflict resolution has played an important part in my training and parish ministry, I am honestly unable to remember a situation that was not resolved 'successfully'. Therefore I will answer the question by describing a complex pastoral situation which may have relevance to your Diocesan situation.*

*3. Describe a difficult situation in your ministry that you did not resolve very successfully. In retrospect, what would you have done differently.*

My first parish, Christ Church, was struggling with a dwindling congregation as the town suffered rising unemployment and a changing identity from a rural community to a rapidly growing city suburb. Sadness and a sense of demoralization grew as many people left to work in the city and unfamiliar people settled in. Unable to cope with these changes or creatively address the new era, symptomatic disagreements grew between the 'matriarchs and patriarchs' and newcomers leaving the community in conflict for many years. The single symbolic unresolved issue of conflict dividing the parish was the modern wooden cross over the altar which my predecessor had hung in place of the church's original Old Celtic cross without any consultation. The process of resolving this issue became the very innovation in discovering new ministries of service and mission to the community.

Representative leadership and I convened several parish community discussion forums. The agreed goal was to understand the hidden issues of the cross conflict. I proposed placing three different crosses over the Altar; a Christ the King cross, symbolic of an Anglo-catholic spirituality, the original Celtic cross, symbolic of broad Anglican spirituality, and the simple wooden cross, symbolic of Evangelical spirituality. Each cross spiritually represented a particular understanding of mission as well as ministry. Each remained over the altar two months. Throughout those six months we held evening discussion forums which enabled us to address issues such as the Church's identity, history in the community, and mission priorities. All meetings began with a potluck supper. Our discussions focused on concrete ways to reach out, welcome and serve the new families in town. A consensus emerged to begin the town's first accredited Nursery School and organize an Annual Town Community Fair. The church's membership and budget tripled in 3 years. Today the Celtic cross is in place as well as an effective broad Anglican mission.

*4. Based on your reading of our Diocesan profile and any other knowledge you have, what do you see as your greatest challenge as the bishop of the DRG, and what excites you most about becoming our bishop?*

My sense is that the greatest challenge for the next Bishop will be ministering to the great cultural diversity of socio-economic and ethnic groupings of people in the Diocese, which encourages - and inspires - the Episcopal Church to be a living witness of the Gospel's good news and a public presence of Christ in many ways. At the same time, the great diversity of parishes in their local community settings, as well as the cultural and ethnic diversity of people, test the spiritual, religious and communal stability of every household of faith. I find these kind of challenges not only exciting but personally engaging. The Gospel calls us to bring the spirit of God near to all people, in

building our witness to God's kingdom.

Today the issues publicized by the press describe conflicts of inclusiveness which focus on issues of sexuality, whereas I believe that the real issue is much deeper and more complex. The real challenge is a global inter-cultural one of tolerance, which must arise out of a more profound understanding of the human condition and the Judeo-Christian ethic of love and respect for God-centered human dignity. These issues of difference and diversity are more than a philosophical matter, but are theological and spiritual, and the work of effective reconciliation on a diocesan level begins with the ministry of the episcopacy. The role and responsibility of a bishop is to be a chief priest and pastor, to '*boldly proclaim and interpret the Gospel of Christ, enlightening the minds and stirring up the conscience of (your) people*' (BCP p.518).

5. *What are the realities facing the church today? What suggestions do you offer to address them?*

I believe that we are experiencing new challenges of moving out from the familiar boundaries of Christian faith, practice and witness to new frontiers of understanding and spiritual insight into not only our secular *political, moral and social* institutional structures but also of all religious institutions.

Within our Anglican-American ethos is the life-giving inclusiveness in diversity which ultimately shapes how the Gospel's imperatives remain at the center of Christ's mission in the world. Unity within diversity is today's most critical issue and yet as Archbishop Michael Ramsey once said, "It may be the Anglican Church's witness to this that its heart will often be broken."

The Episcopal Church's witness today is to the Gospel's teaching that in Christ there is no division and with Christ at the center all remain as one even in their differences. The principal dynamic of creating unity within diversity in a Diocesan situation is to encourage all people to seek and create a common vision for mission and both experience and exercise a radical hospitality toward others, while at the same time remaining faithful to the doctrine, discipline and worship of the Episcopal Church, grounded in our world wide Anglican heritage, thus drawing us into a dynamic and real day to day relationship with God and each other. Faith for me is more than just a set of beliefs and practices passed on by tradition, but rather a daily encounter with the living presence of Christ's Holy Spirit constantly renewing all people and the Church.