



**The Right Reverend Andrew M.L. Dietsche
Bishop of New York**

Sermon for the Liturgy of Collegiality
Holy Tuesday – March 31, 2015

There are too many who were among us last year whom we see no longer. During our last Eastertide we bid farewell to Bishop Don Taylor, and over the months that followed we have been again and again at our altars to commend before God some who had been our true companions on the way. As summer came upon us, John Walsted and Susanna Williams followed Bishop Taylor close behind. In autumn we lost Joan LaLiberte and Allen Newman. At midwinter Dale Baker, Richard Markham and John Dyson Cannon, and just in these last weeks Keith Johnson and Bob Dresser. We also lost one of the first deacons in this diocese, Vivian Seipp, as well as some very long-time lay staff members of this cathedral whose passing rocked the stone foundations of this great edifice. None of them passed without much sorrow on our part. Again and again I have seen you come together in churches across this diocese, and I know what their passing has cost us. Naturally I try in all things to be tough and Clint-Eastwood-like, but God saw fit to give me a way-too-emotional, easily-breakable heart, and I confess that there have been seasons over these last twelve months when I have been overcome by loss. And I have seen that sadness reflected back in your eyes too.

One evening when Keith Johnson was hospitalized I had gone to see him, to pray with him and have communion together, and when I took my oil stock out of my pocket I happened to look more closely at it than I normally do, and saw that almost all of the silver plating has long ago been worn away, and it is mostly just the base metal now. I hold it now, and think of the thousands of times I have unscrewed the top of it and stuck my thumb into the oil, and drawn my thumb across the forehead of someone in my care. Every week I am in one or more of your sacristies. And I see the communion kits lined up on the counter. And I sit in your office to sign confirmation certificates, and there on the desk is your pyx and your stock, your traveling prayer book and your stole. Sometimes these things are coming undone and held together with electrical tape. The lining is coming out of your stole. Well used. And I like to think about you

out in the country where God has put you, among the people God has given you. No one sees, but still you go. To sit with the sick and lay hands on the dying, to mourn with those who mourn, to lay the host on the tongues of people too weak to sit up.

In one parish I served as a priest, I had never fewer than forty-five homebound and shut-in parishioners, and about once a month I would gird my loins and strike out to go see them all. I could do about eight communion visits a day if I didn't stop for lunch. At the end of one such day I stopped in to see Sammie Edgerly. Sammie was 100 years old, fully blind and mostly deaf, an 85 pound tough cookie of an old lady who grew up in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont when that was still hard, primitive country. She was my ninth call of the day, and I had been in and out of nursing homes since morning and I was weary, and all I wanted to do was go home. But we visited for a bit, and then got ourselves organized for communion. She lay in her bed in the nursing home and I sat in a chair by her side. The service went along and went along, but then eventually while I was bent way over, shouting the Lord's Prayer into her ear, I happened to look up at her face. And she was gazing up, wonder all over her face, and the most shining brightness in her sightless eyes. And I thought, O Andy, never take this stuff for granted. Never forget that you have in your hands the sacred mysteries of our redemption. Food for hungry souls. Water for the thirsty.

Tend the sick, Lord Christ, give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous, and all for your love's sake. This is what we ask of God, but it is also what God asks of us — really, demands of us — who have been called, and who have accepted the call to this ministry. Do these things. Make all things well.

I think that a lot of the time it is hard for us to see or know what good we do, or even if we are making any difference at all. Tending and blessing. Soothing and shielding. But God knows. God invests our ministries with a coherence that maybe sometimes only he can see, and God knows how this work blesses us, but also how much it costs. What does it mean to care genuinely? How do we measure the love of God? And how is that love of God mediated through us as pastors?

Let me take a stab at that. Last week I sent a letter to the diocese on the subject of alcohol and the church. I wanted to talk to you about immediate resources that we can offer to anyone struggling right now with addiction or alcoholism, and to let you know about conversations we will have later this spring. But in the letter I said something that has sparked interest for some people, and it makes me realize that I want to say a bit more about that today. I said that “pastoral care is all about the health that happens when accountability and compassion are held in tension.” That pastoral care must be compassionate was obvious to folks. But the reference to accountability in the context of pastoral care caught some by surprise. Particularly, I think, that I equated accountability and compassion as equal measures of what makes up good pastoring.

So I want to talk about the difference between Consolation and Comforting. These words have become in our language virtually synonymous, so I will probably make too much of this. But the root of the word Consolation also gives us the word Solace, while the root of the word Comfort gives us Fortitude and Strength. And if I follow that out it seems to me that Consolation is a passive, reactive word, describing a response to things which have happened. Pain and loss and grief. Someone has been harmed, so we give solace. In contrast, Comforting seen in this light is an active word that suggests the strengthening of a foundation on which to stand, the building of unbreachable walls to withstand the storms that will come.

The Bible tells us that the old man Simeon at the temple was “looking for the consolation of Israel.” And he got it. He shot one glance onto the baby Jesus and said, “OK, I see that everything is going to be all right; now I can die.” He received Consolation for his worried mind. God pitied him in his affliction.

But at the Last Supper, Jesus told his disciples that where he was going they could not come, but that he would send them a Comforter. Who would teach them everything. Who would lead them into the truth. So they could be apostles.

Simeon received Consolation for his woes. The disciples received Comfort for the work and the lives expected of them. Of course, Simeon died in peace, and the apostles on crosses, but this is the difference that I see between Consolation and Comfort. The first calms you down and the second ramps you up. The first is indeed all about compassion, but the second is all about accountability to the Truth of God.

Of course, most of the time Comforting must begin with Consoling. Our first entry as pastors is usually into the hour of crisis, and in parishes that is most often people who are sick, people who are dying, people who are bereaved, marriages in trouble, children in trouble. And if we cannot or will not bring solace to those whose lives are careening off the rails, then we have no business being there. Often all that is needed is solace. But plenty of time there are also truths that need to be said and that people need to hear in order to be well — sometimes hard truths. And if as pastors all we have to give is Consolation, we may betray the person we hope to help, and betray the good gifts the church actually has to offer to someone who is lost and wandering, someone adrift and spinning into cascading crises.

Now I want to say something. We Console, but that is not why we were ordained. It was not simply to give solace that we went through years of discernment and study and preparation and formation. The ministry of Consolation requires no special calling; no vows to make or to renew. Every human being with a heart and the capacity for sympathy and empathy has an obligation to Console those in distress, and every parish must be about raising up a community of just such caring people. Rather, we were ordained to diaconate and priesthood that we might be students and bearers of the Truth of God and the Gospel of Jesus and be honest proclaimers of

that Truth. But also that we might be teachers of how that Truth may be lived out and revealed in the actual lives of people — the ramifications of the Father’s word and of Jesus’ love and of the Spirit’s power for the way people make choices and decide what to do and not do. This is Comfort. It is the Cure of Souls, the making of strength and health and maturity and responsibility that allows genuine love to happen. This is Pastoral Care. It is where accountability to Truth, and compassion for broken spirits, are held in tension.

A dozen years ago or so I was at a conference somewhere else, and I met a priest from another diocese in a galaxy far away. I said that I was the Canon for Pastoral Care in New York, so he told me that he had a difficult pastoral situation in his parish right at the moment. It seems that a man in his church, who held a position of parish leadership, had over some months embezzled many tens of thousands of dollars from the church accounts, and had left them in critical financial straits. I said that that was awful, and asked how they were doing at getting the money back. I asked if they were working with the district attorney. And he said, “Oh no, I didn’t press charges! I thought that if we prosecuted it would prevent me from being pastorally available to him.” And what I said was, “OK, fine.” But what I thought was, “Of course, no one should ever again give a dime to your church.”

But his real failing was to the man himself. By understanding pastoral care only as Consolation, by which he meant to be gentle and unchallenging, the priest became the single greatest impediment to his getting well. The man knew he was a thief. He knew he had done wrong. And he had a right to expect that the church would acknowledge what he already knew and hold him accountable to the vows of his baptism and the teachings of his God. What he needed was not someone to hold his hand, but to name his sin, to call him to his better self, to rekindle within him the ember of holiness, to help him see the price he must pay for the things he had done, and then like a good shepherd, to lead him on the hard road of reconciliation and amendment of life. He didn’t know how to come home on his own, and he needed a Comforter, to make him strong and brave and faithful, that he might be helped to the health that happens when accountability to Truth and compassion for brokenness are held in tension.

In recent months I have been to several funerals out of state. And at one of them I was startled by the editing that had been done to the prayer of commendation. “Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you,” we prayed, “a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a beloved child of your own redeeming.” And I thought, “Well. The word is Sinner. A Sinner of your own redeeming.” And I wondered that we might now think it impolite to say sinner. And I thought, if there is no sinner, then there is no redemption. And what solace then for the bereaved? I saw: the failure to Comfort robs us of Consolation.

What does it mean to care genuinely? How do we measure the love of God? And how is that love of God mediated through us as pastors? Perhaps in that tension where Comfort is wedded

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to Consolation. Truth to solace. When accountability meets compassion. Where we speak truth to weakness. There is health.

This strange life we have accepted has covered us in blessing, and cost us everything. Now we will renew the promises we made at our ordination, and say Yes to our vocation once again. Never forget that this is supposed to be hard. The loneliness is built into the calling. But it is truth, and the possibilities born of truth are the best thing in the world. Amen.