

Dear brothers and sisters,

Many of you have asked me about the election of the Rev. Kevin Thew Forrester as Bishop of Northern Michigan, and in particular about whether I gave consent for his consecration. I did not; nor did the Standing Committee, which had its own in-depth conversation on this important matter.

Several issues have been raised concerning Fr. Thew Forrester in the months since his election. First, he has undergone “lay ordination” in the Zen Buddhist tradition. Is this simply an acknowledgement that he engages in meditation practices with Buddhist roots? Or does it indicate a more dangerous mingling of Christian and Buddhist teaching, a hazardous syncretism? I do not have a clear answer to that question, though his articulation of the Christian faith seems to blend spiritual categories in a disquieting way. Second, the election process in the Diocese of Northern Michigan, while not uncanonical, gives the appearance of a closed system. The nominating committee presented only one candidate to the electing convention, and thus the election seems like the ratification of a decision already made. Third, the website of Fr. Thew Forrester’s parish – St. Paul’s, Marquette – indicates that he has written his own Eucharistic prayers and even made significant modifications to the baptismal liturgy. The Book of Common Prayer, on the other hand, is part of the constitution of the Church; its use is not optional, and clergy are not free to modify its texts. The Prayer Book is our doctrinal anchor, rooted in Scripture and summarizing the essential teachings of the Christian faith. Fourth, Fr. Thew Forrester’s sermons – also posted on the parish website – indicate a disturbing weakness in his understanding (and embrace) of basic Christian doctrines: the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the atoning work of Christ on the cross. As I’ve pondered Fr. Thew Forrester’s election, this is the most troubling dimension of all, and in the end it is what led me to withhold consent.

In the Christian Church, bishops are not “private citizens”. They are called “to be one with the apostles in proclaiming Christ’s resurrection and interpreting the Gospel, and to testify to Christ’s sovereignty as Lord of lords and King of kings . . . [and] to guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the Church” (BCP, p. 517). These are solemn obligations, and inherent to the ministry of bishop in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. St. Paul himself lays this charge upon his successor, Timothy: “Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us” (2 Timothy 1:13-14).

A bishop’s teaching ministry must never be idiosyncratic. We have no message other than the one that has been given to us. The task of bishops is to pass on that message as faithfully as we can; to proclaim Jesus Christ – crucified, risen, coming again; clearly and winsomely to present his person and his work; and to offer the world a Gospel that challenges, heals, and restores us to a relationship with the Father. With the information I have at hand, I am not convinced that Fr. Thew Forrester would be able to discharge this essential obligation of episcopal office.

I cast my No vote without joy; indeed, with sorrow in my heart. If the Church denies consent for Fr. Thew Forrester to be consecrated as Bishop of Northern Michigan, it will be a tragic development for the diocese, and for Fr. Thew Forrester himself. He is, from all reports, a beloved and respected priest, passionate about ministry and committed to his people. Please join me in praying for him, and for the diocese, that in the midst of a most difficult time Jesus will be experienced more and more deeply, and ultimately his kingdom extended and his people with encouraged. With all blessings I am

Yours in Christ,

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