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

God recently gave me a "near-death" experience. Now before you get alarmed: I'm not talking about a potentially fatal illness or a dreadful accident. No, this is something subtler. You're probably aware that the Diocese of Northern Indiana has a historic relationship with Howe Military School. The Bishop of Northern Indiana serves as president of the Board of Trustees, and an Episcopal priest holds a dual role as chaplain of the school and rector of St. Mark's Church. St. Mark's worships in a beautiful chapel called St. James', owned by the school, modeled after a traditional English collegiate church, choir stalls lining the nave, a stunning marble altar at the east end of the building. A series of stained-glass windows adorn the north wall of the chapel, each depicting a bishop. At the far right end is Bishop Knickerbocker, the last bishop of the entire state of Indiana. Next to him, working leftward, is Bishop John Hazen White, first Bishop of the Diocese of Michigan City (later renamed Northern Indiana); then Campbell Gray, the second Bishop; then Reginald Mallett; then Walter Klein; then William C. R. Sheridan. To Bishop Sheridan's left are two more bishops, vested in cope and mitre but with no face under the hat. I said "are," but more correctly "were". A few months ago, Fr. David Yaw, chaplain at Howe and rector of St. Mark's, along with Deacon George Douglass, began a project to fill in those last two bishops. And so, in early September, when I went out to Howe for a board meeting, Fr. Yaw invited me to take a look at the north wall of St. James' Chapel. There we were. To the left of Bishop Sheridan, the bishop is no longer faceless. He is unmistakably Francis Campbell Gray, sixth Bishop of Northern Indiana; and to *his* left, yours truly – with a toothy grin, moustache a little darker than in real life, but recognizably me.

I called this a "near-death" experience. Why? Because most people don't end up in stained glass until they're already dead. Looking up at that window, and imagining, say, a century from now, Howe cadets and St. Mark's parishioners gazing at the smiling bishop, I couldn't help wondering: What will they know – not simply about me, but about us, about *this* generation of Christians, the people who led the church into the 21st century? What kind of legacy will we leave? What will people remember about us? When you contemplate your mortality – when you ponder the fact that some day you will die – you find yourself asking questions about life and death and why the Lord has put us here.

For the past seven weeks, we've been hearing on Sunday morning selections from 1 and 2 Timothy, two letters at the back end of the New Testament. The Apostle Paul is nearing the end of his life. And so he writes two final letters to his young friend and assistant, Timothy. At the end of the second letter – we heard this just last Sunday – he says to Timothy, "As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time for my departure has come" (2 Tim. 4:6). Paul is in prison, presumably in Rome, and the only way out of custody is by the executioner's sword. Tradition says that in 64 AD, during the persecution under the emperor Nero, Paul was in fact beheaded. So Paul writes to his understudy Timothy and prepares Timothy to take leadership in the Christian Church. These are Paul's last recorded words, his final advice. It's his "near-death" letter. Listen to what Paul says to Timothy:

> In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully (2 Tim. 4:1-5).

In other words, Paul says to Timothy: *Stick to the basics. Keep on keeping on. Don't stop telling people about Jesus. Be aware that Christians will be tempted to wander away from the faith. Don't succumb. It's going to be hard. Keep your eye on the prize. Don't give up, no matter what.*

Which brings me to the Core Values of the Diocese of Northern Indiana. In April of 2000, about six weeks after my ordination as a bishop, I was formally seated in the Cathedral of St. James. In the old days, we'd say, "enthroned," but now the word sounds a bit imperial. So a bishop is *seated*. There's not much liturgy involved. The dean leads the bishop over to the chair, points, and the bishop sits down. So, to fill out the service, we sang Evensong and I preached a sermon; you might call it an inaugural address. Over the course of that address I talked about four "core values" that, I said, should under gird everything we do as a diocese. The values are these:

- A passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ
- A heart for the lost
- A willingness to do whatever it takes
- A commitment to one another

In the intervening four and a half years, these values have taken on a life of their own. Parishes reproduce them in newsletters and Sunday bulletins. They turn up on bulletin boards. I've seen them inserted into parish mission statements, printed on balloons, and even stenciled onto tee shirts. I'm often surprised to find that people have memorized them. The question I find myself asking is: How are we doing? Do they

make any difference in our lives? A hundred years from now, when someone writes the history of the diocese in the 2000s, what will that historian say about the Core Values and the way we lived them? Remember Paul's final advice to Timothy: *Stick to the basics. Keep on keeping on. Don't stop telling people about Jesus. Be aware that Christians will be tempted to wander away from the faith. Don't succumb. It's going to be hard. Keep your eye on the prize. Don't give up, no matter what*. Will we be faithful to that call? What I'm going to do in this convention address is to take a look at the Core Values and take a look at our lives and the challenges we face – and see how they line up.

I. A passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ

Jesus is at the heart of everything we do. He's the one who rescues us from sin, restores us to a relationship with the Father, promises us the gift of the Holy Spirit, calls us to be disciples, and offers us the hope of eternal life. Jesus is the motive for our ministry, the reason why our church exists and why, Sunday by Sunday, we gather together to hear the Word, to celebrate the Eucharist, and to sing God's praises.

Last spring I asked one of our aspirants – that's the technical term for someone who's exploring the possibility of ordained ministry – what Jesus means to him. He replied, "Jesus is cool!" Now for the theologians in our midst, I acknowledge that the young man has a lot to learn in seminary. He'll learn about the Chalcedonian definition of the two natures of Christ, human and divine; about the doctrine of the atonement, the biblical teaching that Jesus' death on the cross reconciles us to the Father; about the Lordship of Jesus Christ over the universe, over the church, over our lives. But still, the young man has it right. He's discovered that Jesus lays claim to his life, and he's responding by offering himself to Jesus, body, soul, and spirit. I couldn't ask for more.

In fact, this young man is a symbol of a marvelous development in our diocese. Five years ago, we had two postulants for Holy Orders. Now we have twelve. They represent a cross-section of the diocese. Some are young – three moving directly from college to seminary, with several other college students in the "wings". Some are older; seasoned veterans, so to speak. Some are preparing for full-time parish ministry; others expect to be bi-vocational, serving as priests or deacons and at the same time holding down a secular job. The Commission on Ministry and I always ask our aspirants the same question: What does Jesus mean to you? And all of them – young and mature, men and women – tells us the story of how they've come to know and love and follow Jesus.

This story isn't limited to people seeking ordination. Far from it! Another diocesan renaissance has to do with ministry to children and youth. Last summer we offered two camps for young people: a camp for those from third through ninth grade (led by Tim and Kim Gray) and, for the first time, a camp for high school students (coordinated by Jason Beschinski, our diocesan youth missioner, and Julie Handschumacher, youth pastor at St. Andrew, Kokomo). I was able to spend a significant amount of time at each camp, and so my enthusiasm comes from first-hand experience. These camps are Christ-centered, energetic, superbly staffed, thoughtfully prepared – with top-notch teaching, lots of fun, and the chance for young people to

establish friendships across the diocese. My only disappointment comes from realizing how many of our young people haven't yet attended one of our camps. Next year we're hoping to increase significantly the number of kids attending both camps. So here's a word to the clergy, because the mailings first come across your desk: Consider this a personal plea from the bishop to pass on to your congregation the wonderful opportunity represented by our two camps. And a word to lay people as well: Be sure to ask your priest in early spring about registration materials. The Sunday following our high school camp, it happened that I celebrated the Eucharist at St. Anne's, Warsaw. A young woman who had attended the camp came up to me and said, "Bishop, camp changed my life!" She was living proof that ministry to children and youth can transform a generation and lead young people to Jesus Christ.

As an aside, we are blessed to have Jason Beschinski on the bishop's staff. He serves as diocesan youth missioner, and we take that title very seriously. He's willing, indeed *eager*, to travel. If you are wondering what might be the next step in youth ministry in your parish, give him a call and arrange for him to meet with your vestry or a youth ministry task force. He can explore with you some creative ways that you can energize the young people in your congregation. Even small parishes can offer vibrant, life-changing youth ministry.

Our first core value is "a passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ," and that means that Jesus is the measuring stick for everything we do: our worship services, our education for youth and adults, all of our programs and activities. That leads me to an observation. Admittedly, what I'm about to say is subjective. I can't quantify it or cite figures. But here is what I experience on the basis of visiting every one of our parishes at least once a year. People are discovering how to talk about Jesus. This is new for Episcopalians. Typically we're comfortable talking about *God* or *Our Lord* or *The Man Upstairs*; but we've tended to shy away from the name of Jesus. And now, in the Diocese of Northern Indiana, I hear people more and more being open about their relationship with Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is up to something very important in your life and in mine. We're meeting Jesus in new and fresh ways, and we're learning how to tell others about him. That, my brothers and sisters, is the first step in a spiritual revolution.

II. A heart for the lost

St. Paul puts it this way: God the Father "desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God; and there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all" (2 Tim. 2:4-6). Paul is giving is a glimpse into the heart of God. He's telling us two things. First, without Jesus, we're lost. Second, Jesus yearns to find us and to bring us home. And the way that Jesus does that is to use ordinary, garden-variety Christians like and me to make that happen.

Let me paint a picture to show how this works. St. Mary's, Monticello, is the smallest congregation in the diocese. In 2003 they reported an average Sunday

attendance of seven! But St. Mary's comes under general heading of "little but mighty". The congregation meets in a 150-year-old house that the congregation renovated in two ways. Downstairs they've redesigned what was originally a living room into a chapel, using church furniture from the original All Saints, Syracuse. Upstairs they've turned bedrooms into guest suites and created Grace House, a homeless shelter. It was the first such shelter in White County and, for the first few years of existence, was run almost exclusively by St. Mary's parishioners. Well, when I visited St. Mary's a few weeks ago, a young woman named Kathy arrived at the 8:00 a.m. Eucharist on a bicycle. She participated eagerly in the liturgy, stayed for a while to chat with parishioners, and then pedaled happily away. Later I learned her story. It turns out that she'd been a resident of Grace House, and while she lived there began to worship with the St. Mary's congregation. Later, she moved to a place of her own; but unfortunately a long-standing legal problem caught up with her and she'd been sentenced to jail time. The judge, however, allowed her to serve her time under house arrest. She asked the judge for one exception to her confinement at home. "Could I worship at St. Mary's?" The judge allowed her that one free moment per week. St. Mary's has a heart for the lost – and it's a heart that reaches out in creative ways and touches physical needs as well as the deepest need of the human heart – the need for a relationship with the Master of the Universe.

If you serve on a vestry, I hope that you're receiving the Episcopal Church Foundation publication called *Vestry Papers*. The diocese pays for a subscription for every single vestry member. In the last issue, Bishop Claude Payne – recently retired Bishop of Texas – writes about a population we often miss. What he says may be an encouragement to us, and especially to our smaller churches in smaller communities with declining populations:

> Early in my episcopate I visited a congregation . . . which was in a small town where there was little growth. The lack of young people was a major concern. They had an energetic vicar with leadership skills who believed firmly in the evangelism imperative. The congregation was composed mostly of retired people. When I asked whether there were other retired people around they said Yes. So I suggested that they missionize the retired folk and not be paralyzed by their lack of younger people. . . . Several years later I found they had not only attracted retirees but also had several younger folk in the congregation, including children. Their culture had changed from a focus on survival and a preoccupation with young people they didn't have to [a culture] of miraculous possibility.

For the past three years or so, I've been traveling around the diocese offering Newcomer Ministry Workshops. So far 21 parishes have invited me to make this presentation (which, in its most recent form, has morphed into Power Point!). The workshop covers five areas: invitation, first impressions, welcome, follow-up, and incorporation. As a result of the workshop, a number of parishes have made significant changes in the way they do business on Sunday morning. The key has to do with how we see ourselves and our ministry when we come to the Eucharist. Are we there to be fed? Yes, of course, in word and sacrament. But we're also there to feed. When we come to church, we're "on duty," and our ministry is to welcome guests as though they were Jesus

himself. The point here is that our heart for the lost takes many forms: it has to do with the world around us, with all of its needs, from the most obvious like food and shelter and clothing to the most profound need of all, our need for God.

III. A willingness to do whatever it takes

I'm going to turn our attention to a couple of difficult issues. The first falls under the heading of our third Core Value. For the past year or so, I've become increasingly aware of a "theme" running through the diocese. The symptom of the theme is a financial crisis that's affecting especially our middle-sized churches; but the underlying issue, I believe, is spiritual.

We can roughly divide the 37 congregations of our diocese into three categories – small, medium, and large. I define the small churches as those which are served by a part-time priest, or which are led by a senior warden, with the Sunday Eucharist presided over by supply clergy, often on a very short-term basis. Middle-size churches are those with a Sunday attendance between 50 and 150, served by a full-time priest. The large church category is represented by congregations with a Sunday attendance exceeding 150; some of these churches are multi-staff. Now the categories aren't quite as neat as they sound. We have one church, for example, with a Sunday attendance of about 25 that's served by a full-time priest, and another with a Sunday attendance of about 100 whose rector is bi-vocational and serves on a part-time basis. By my calculation, 15 of our churches are small, 12 middle-sized, and five large. Five defy easy categorization, and are somewhere on the border between small and middle-sized. During the past year, two parishes have moved, or are in process of moving, from full-time rector to part-time priest-in-charge status, and several others are in danger of doing so. In fact, by my calculations, eleven churches in the diocese at one time employed a full-time rector and are now served by part-time clergy.

Those are the numbers. Here is what I've been experiencing. For about a year, I've been attending the same vestry meeting, over and over and over, often though not always, in middle-sized churches. The meeting goes something like this: "Bishop, we're in trouble. Our attendance is flat, neither growing nor shrinking noticeably. Our giving is up – slightly. Our expenses are up – *hugely*. Utilities and health insurance are eating us alive. We're not sure if we can pay our bills. We're stretched as thin as we can go. And so we've got a choice. We can stop paying our assessment to the diocese. Or we can cease to employ a full-time priest. The handwriting's on the wall. The issue is *when*, not *if*." I've heard some variation of these words numerous times, and last month six congregations approached Diocesan Council requesting full or partial assessment reduction. (Diocesan Council agreed to those requests – totaling over $60,000 – and the only way that we could balance our own diocesan budget was to take that amount from our pledge to the national Church. You'll be hearing more about that later when we look at our 2005 budget.) So I've been "connecting the dots". This is a diocesan-wide crisis. It affects primarily our middle-sized churches, though I should add that at least one of our smaller and one of our larger churches are also in significant difficulty; and every church, whatever its size, is feeling the pinch of making ends meet.

The crisis, as I said, is financial – at least in its symptoms. Its effects, however, go deeper than money. Around the diocese I hear echoes of discouragement and fear. We are blessed to be served by hard-working and committed clergy. Vestry members take seriously their roles as leaders, decision-makers, and discerners. People are doing their very best; but in many churches the results are meager. In fact, our diocesan statistics point to a downturn not simply in our financial picture, but in worship attendance as well. You may remember that in 2000 I articulated the BHAG – the Big Hoosier Audacious Goal: that we seek to double our average Sunday attendance by the year 2010. How are we doing? A couple of parishes are indeed experiencing significant growth; but the overall statistics are negative. From 2001 to 2003, on an average Sunday in the Diocese of Northern Indiana, attendance dropped from 3089 to 2957; not a disastrous slide, perhaps even statistically insignificant; but certainly we're heading in the wrong direction.

Let me flag two issues for us to consider in the coming year. The first is *conversion*. Trinity Church, Michigan City, is one of the churches that's experienced the realities I've been describing in this section of the address. Giving is up, but expenses are rising even faster – and all of this in the face of an important emphasis that Trinity's rector, Fr. Eugene Kohlbecker, has been making on mission. With Fr. Eugene's permission, I'm going to share with you something he wrote in the Trinity Church newsletter last month. It's about conversion. He says that real conversion does five things. Conversion

1. Challenges us to seek an ever-deepening relationship with Jesus by setting aside more time for prayer each day;
2. Expects that we will become more faithful stewards of the gifts we have received, endeavoring to establish the tithe, both in pledge and in practice as the minimum standard of our giving back to God;
3. Requires us to observe the week as a gift from God, including the habitual reception of the Body and Blood of Christ in community gathered (as on Sunday morning) and the constant dedication of our households to keep the Sabbath;
4. Compels us to speak of our relationship with Jesus to others; we speak to family, friends, acquaintances, and strangers of the significance and meaning of our weekly encounter with Jesus Christ; and
5. Sets our hearts on the even more radical transformation of our lives.

Fr. Eugene has laid out a five-point program that I commend to every vestry and leadership group in the diocese.

The second issue is *flexibility*. This is the "whatever it takes" part. In the past year – actually, for almost five years – I've been meeting with clergy and vestries and helping them to come up with ministry solutions that meet their needs. This is right and proper, and a ministry of encouragement is at the heart of what a bishop should be doing. At the same time, I realize that these solutions have been somewhat piecemeal. We look for a plan for Church A, and then another plan for Church B, and still another for Church

C. Perhaps we need to look at the whole picture, and ask a radical question: Should we be "doing diocese" differently? Are there other, and more creative, ways that we can live our lives together? Instead of propping up one church and then another, can we discover together a plan for ministering as a unit in the northern third of the State of Indiana? I propose this year to appoint a commission (you might call it a Blue Ribbon Panel) to do some outside-the-box thinking – not simply about raising money or evangelism; but rather about how together we can meet the challenges of ministry in our region in this first half of the first century of a new millennium. I have no idea what this group will come up with, or how long we'll need to devote to the process; but I'm convinced that we must start some creative thinking. We must be willing to do whatever it takes as we follow Jesus together; and that willingness expresses itself as well in our fourth Core Value.

IV. A commitment to one another

It was the late Speaker of the House, Tip O'Neill, who said: "All politics is local." True enough; but sometimes issues from the outside impinge upon our lives and demand our attention. This is just such a time in the Episcopal Church. As you know, this time last year we were in the midst of a rocky autumn, in the aftermath of the previous summer's General Convention. At our diocesan convention in Munster, we debated an amendment to our 2004 budget that would, in effect, have allowed individual vestries to insert a "conscience clause" onto their parish pledge card, so that members could direct their giving away from the national Church. The amendment lost, on a vote of 65-63, with two abstentions. In the weeks that followed convention, a few rectors – including one who had voted *against* the amendment – contacted me and asked if we could find a way, somehow, to provide "conscience relief". Several of those rectors said that without that relief, they would lose so many significant pledges that the very survival of their parishes would be in doubt. I realized that I had to assist these parishes to discover a solution; and yet, of course, it was too late to replay convention.

Fr. Patrick Ormos helped us to find a way forward. When the "conscience clause" amendment failed in Munster, he immediately moved a further amendment to the budget which said, in effect, that any shortfall to our diocesan budget would be taken from our giving to the national Church. Fr. Patrick's amendment passed virtually unanimously. And so, as a pastoral response to those clergy seeking "conscience relief," I applied the Ormos Amendment. I asked them to tell us what pledges requested exemption, and we would re-calculate their assessment accordingly. The absolute numbers are quite small, involving eight parishes and about $7800; but this did enable us to face what appeared to be an insoluble dilemma in these congregations, and to do that with a pastoral rather than a legislative solution.

Meanwhile, as you're all aware, the Anglican Communion as a whole continues to wrestle with the aftermath of the Episcopal Church's General Convention. On October 18, a commission appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury issued its long-awaited report – a long, complex, and balanced document. The commission takes the Episcopal

Church to task for acting unilaterally, and makes a series of recommendations. Among them are these:

- That the Episcopal Church express regret that "the proper constraints of the bonds of affection were breached" by our actions;
- That for the sake of the unity of the Communion we "effect a moratorium on the election and consent to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate who is living in a same gender union until some new consensus in the Anglican Communion emerges;
- That each of the 38 provinces of the Communion enter a Covenant in which we all agree to restraint and mutual consultation in our actions; and
- That we also, in accordance with a Lambeth Conference resolution, find practical ways to listen to the concerns, and hear the stories of, our gay and lesbian members.

These recommendations – along with the entire report – will be reviewed first by the primates of the Anglican Communion, then by a representative body called the Anglican Consultative Council, and then by the Archbishop of Canterbury. At the same time, the Episcopal Church's own leadership – first the House of Bishops, and then General Convention – will respond to it. It will be a long and arduous and perhaps painful process. I do believe that the report gives us a grace-filled way to live together as a worldwide Communion of Christians; and I pray that everyone who reads and responds to this document will do so with an open and receptive heart, eager for reconciliation.

In our own diocese, reconciliation is an essential part of our life together. Shortly after General Convention, a gay and lesbian ministry group in one of our parishes invited Sylvia and me to spend an evening with them. We gladly did so – celebrating the Eucharist together, sharing a meal, and telling our stories. No one tried to convince anyone of anything. We simply spent time together and recognized that what binds us together is Jesus. There are no simple solutions here; deep differences based on convictions aren't erased; but it does remind us that the source of unity – indeed our only hope – is the Lord Jesus Christ. And Jesus invites us to come to the foot of the cross together.

Recently our diocese has been asked to join with three others – Los Angeles, Western Massachusetts, and Ohio – in sponsoring a reconciliation seminar under the leadership of Canon Brian Cox and a team from the Diocese of Los Angeles. I happily accepted that invitation, and will be recruiting a team of eight or ten persons to travel to Springfield, Massachusetts, next April for four days. If you think that the Lord might be calling you to participate in this venture, please let me know. Because our diocese has dealt with the aftermath of General Convention in a way that fills me with gratitude and awe, it may be that we can both learn skills and model behavior that can be a blessing to the wider church. Jesus has called us to be committed to one another. That's a costly commitment. It touches not only our theological struggles, but also the challenges we face together in bringing the Gospel to our region. Indeed, how we deal with one another in a time of controversy may well be the test of our ability to share Jesus authentically.

Jesus is doing wonderful things in our diocese. Through the ministry of the 37 missionary outposts of the Diocese of Northern Indiana, people are meeting Jesus, discovering how much he loves them, experiencing his healing touch, and being empowered by his Holy Spirit. May our hearts be ready to answer his call and to follow where he leads.

Let us pray:

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*