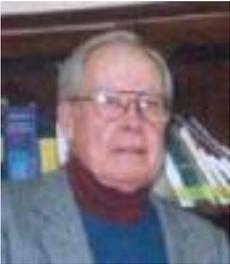


Kansas City-St. Joseph diocese priest criticizes his bishop's leadership

Thomas C. Fox | Sep. 15, 2009 NCR Today



Father Michael J. Gillgannon, a widely respected missionary priest of the diocese of Kansas

City-St. Joseph, has written an open letter to his bishop, Robert W. Finn, taking strong exception to his leadership.

"You appear to me and many priests of my generation who lived the Spirit filled days of Vatican II," wrote Gillgannon, "as one whose task is to reverse the changes of that great event. You have given the impression that your changes were for the sake of a narrow 'orthodoxy' which seems to imply that the bishops and priests and laity before you were not orthodox."

Ordained in 1958, Gillgannon began his career in campus ministry in 1962 at Western Missouri State University. In 1966, he served on the advisory committee of the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Conference for the post-Vatican II reorganization of Catholic Campus Ministry in the United States. Since 1974, he has worked as a missionary in La Paz, serving as pastor of San Antonio Parish, as episcopal vicar of the Eastern Deanery of La Paz, and as national chaplain for Bolivian Campus Ministry. He is the founder and director of campus ministry for the La Paz, Bolivia Archdiocese and an occasional writer for *NCR*.

September 11, 2009

Dear Bishop Finn,

Greetings from Bolivia. I am enjoying good health and, with no complications from the altitude, I am able to help in a variety of ways as I continue to serve the people here in the Archdiocese of La Paz, Bolivia. I was sorry we did not have an opportunity for conversation in Kansas City as you were quite busy and I was very low on energy after my cardiac operation.

I recently received the notice from Father Ernie Davis of the diocesan Priests' Retreat at the Lake of the Ozarks this September. Father said you will be a presenter and will share your Episcopal experience, your vision, your leadership and your relationship with the priests. I wish that I could be there with you and my brother priests but that is not possible.

Bishop Finn, I would like to share some thoughts with you (and other priests and committed Catholic friends) on some common concerns. Of course, our most common concern is our love for Jesus and his Church as the People of God seeking the freedom and salvation of the entire human family in its search for human fulfillment in God.

My recent experience in Kansas City reading articles, watching television, and seeing visitors during my convalescence left me saddened about the deep divisions in our country and our Church. But denying or covering over our differences will not resolve them. Only frank and sincere dialogue with real changes will bring us to a new unity, the Eucharistic unity bequeathed us by Jesus.

So I speak my concerns to you Bishop in that spirit. You have made many changes in the diocese since you came with a particular agenda. You appear to me and many priests of my generation who lived the Spirit filled days of Vatican II as one whose task is to reverse the changes of that great event. You have given the impression that your changes were for the sake of a narrow "orthodoxy" which seems to imply that the bishops and priests and laity before you were not orthodox.

In the last few years you have totally changed the diocesan lay formation center (terminating its quite competent teaching team) which was a model for the country as begun by Bishop John Sullivan and continued by Bishop Boland. You have made Ave Maria University and its theological school the only source of lay formation in the diocese though there are many other national sources available on a theological continuum from conservative to liberal, all within Catholic orthodoxy (I know various priests have written to you with their doubts about that). You give the impression you are not working from a pastoral model of unity with respect for diversity, a more traditional Catholic practice, but from an ideological desire for a narrow uniformity and an even narrower spirituality.

More recently, however, I have been deeply concerned by your pastoral document, co-authored with Archbishop Naumann, on health care in the United States. Many priests and laypeople have wondered about your applications of the principles of Subsidiarity and Personal Responsibility. 47,000,000 citizens in the world's richest country are without health care. The national arguments for change have been going on for years. We cannot leave those poor without care. Your document seems to say the poor must fend for themselves and take better care of themselves. It seems to say "private" care is more responsible as opposed to "government bureaucracies". Would you be meaning government administered "Medicare" and "Medicaid"? Would you be counseling Catholics to leave those programs for private programs?

Traditional Catholic Social teaching has always praised the noble task of government and responsible political actors to protect and promote the "common good". The government is not the enemy of the people. It is the servant or so I was always taught in Catholic schools and seminaries. Are you suggesting a change in that teaching? Are you presenting a debatable political application, your point of view, as the only practical application of Catholic Doctrine? Thoughtful Catholics can and will disagree privately and publicly and be in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. Or have I missed something in the American Bishops several statements over years on the role of conscience and principles in public debate.

Is it not the case that every private insurance plan "limits" its providers and limits coverage if one takes another "option", or has a costly sickness? So only the very rich are truly "free" to choose to pay for all treatment options with costly personal insurance policies provided by their employer or paid from their personal wealth. I was particularly conscious of all this since February as I had the most serious sickness of my life. I could never have paid for my care without Medicare and our diocesan priests' insurance plan.

Living and working in the poverty of Bolivia for 35 years I constantly see the economics of health care and the public "common good" as basic to all debates and laws about universal health care coverage in any country and with any government. Without the economic solidarity of the common good written into law the poor and marginalized will always be left out.

Another problem of concern is the pastoral document on the 2008 elections you authored. You, Bishop,

and many bishops of your generation, seem to be proposing a one-issue public dialogue on political candidates and platforms which deny the Catholic Tradition of social teaching on a wide range of issues expressed in the Seamless Garment social teachings of Cardinal Bernardin and his generation of prelates. And which I was taught in the seminary of the '50s and later in the documents of Vatican II.

Later when some 60 or so Catholic Bishops of your generation condemned the new president on pro-life issues you failed as teachers. Your style and your strategy finds resonance with only a small segment of the Church and the wider American public you would like to influence. You may think of yourself and the others as defending human life by speaking the 'truth' to power but you seem to most of us as pushing your own political agenda and not the wisdom of Catholic teaching. And worse, you give the impression that those who disagree with you are opposed to the defense of life.

How pro-life have you been on Iraq and Afghanistan? Have you questioned the new American practice of hiring the poor and the marginalized without other job opportunities as mercenaries to fight and die in our wars? Meanwhile, ending the draft system (which I favored in the Vietnam conflict) has come to mean middle and upper-class families (mostly white) need not fear their children will have to interrupt their lives to die in an unwise and unjust war. Americans can forget patriotism or that we are even in a war as seemingly, by common professional and political agreement, our wars will no longer be presented in their bloody violence in our news medium. Have you formed Catholic consciences on war and armaments and national defense budgets?

What about national and personal wealth and its responsible uses? What about race and class and urban and suburban ghettos taken for granted in our society and in our educational systems? The list of American social problems continues to challenge the richness and amplitude of Catholic Social Teachings for solid, reasonable, humane applications for the common good of all our citizens.

We have many wonderful values in our Church and in our country. But our civil and ecclesial divisions and the acerbic and accusatory tenor of our dialogues could end our acceptance of others and respect for difference. Particularly when ideologies replace reasoned pragmatic, but ethical, solutions. You do not have a coherent or compelling vision of Church teaching or of pastoral strategies that can convert people and change their attitudes and actions. That is why your leadership, and that of many other American Bishops, is questioned so deeply. Our church is more divided among leadership and faithful than at any time in my life of 76 years, and 51 years as a priest. We have to ask ourselves why so many Catholics are leaving the Church. Are they sinners? Or searchers? A search to which our in-house quarrels have not responded.

So let us continue to dialogue and reason together from our common values and principles looking for the best social and pastoral solutions to the problems of our country and our Church. And, as always, let us pray for one another, our Church, and our country. May God bless and guide you in your difficult role as pastor and teacher.

Sincerely yours in Christ,
Rev. Michael J. Gillgannon