

Office of the Bishop

March 19, 2020

Solemnity of St. Joseph, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Dear Brothers and Sisters of St. Joseph and St. Francis of Assisi:

I write directly to you, as your bishop, regarding the matter of your pastor, Fr. Mark White, which weighs heavy on my heart. For months, you may have read his written public communications or his words within the secular media. For months, I have chosen to remain silent in the hopes of remedying the situation internally. But, relying on the Holy Spirit, I feel a pressing need to address my concerns with you as members of this diocese entrusted to my care.

St. Ignatius of Antioch, “Doctor of Unity,” wrote: *“Your excellent presbyters, who are a credit to God, are as suited to the bishop as strings to a harp. So, in your harmony of mind and heart the song you sing is Jesus Christ. Every one of you should form a choir, so that, in harmony of sound through harmony of hearts, and in unity taking the note from God, you may sing with one voice through Jesus Christ to the Father.”*

Harmony. Unity. St. Ignatius deliberately selects these words when touching on the hierarchy, order and structure of the Church intended to protect the unity of Christ’s flock. As such, *The Code of Canon Law* indicates that Clergy have a special obligation to show reverence and obedience to the Holy Father and to their own bishop. All clerics are reminded that they are “working for the same purpose, namely the building up of the Body of Christ.” They are always to do their utmost to foster among God’s people peace and harmony based on justice.

Regarding the conduct of pastors, the *Code* enjoins them to “cooperate with his proper bishop and with the *presbyterium* (fellow clergy) of the diocese. Moreover, he is to strive to ensure that the faithful are concerned for the community of the parish, that they feel themselves to be members both of the diocese and of the universal Church, and that they take part in and sustain works which promote this community.”

By contrast, for more than a year, in fact since the fall of 2018, in my judgment Father Mark White has worked **against** the unity of the Church, promoted disrespect for the Holy Father, the Church hierarchy, his bishop, and has demonstrated a will adverse to obedience to the bishop of his diocese, which he took an oath to uphold at his ordination.

This has occurred on his website through a series of blog posts under the general heading of “the McCarrick case, the PA Grand Jury Report, the February 2019 Vatican Meeting, and the Scandal in general” beginning (according to Father White’s own index) from November 17, 2018 to October 3, 2019.

Numerous efforts urging Father White to refrain from inflammatory comments or “posting” on his blog have resulted in his attempt to publicly ridicule or embarrass his bishop.



(see, for example, September 20, 2018 and November 13, 2019 now republished on his website in direct contradiction to my instruction to him of November 21, 2019).

On numerous occasions, I invited Father White to meet with me privately to address these concerns, yet each time he refused or demurred, claiming he had too many local demands to take the time to meet in Richmond. When I responded to his questions by letter, he chose to publish my personal correspondence to him on his public blog (September 20, 2018) rather than meet with me in person.

In following Father White's blog postings, if one only considers headlines, for example — "Pope Francis a Heretic" [May 3, 2019]; or "The Opaque 'Transparency' of the Richmond Diocese" [Jan. 31, 2019], or "The College of Lying Cowards" [May 24, 2019] — it is clear Father White is publishing headlines that shock and sensationalize in order to draw attention.

As is evident simply from the dates given in Father White's own index, my efforts to speak to him or dissuade him from the inflammatory and contemptuous comments have been proven fruitless as seen in a few of the following quotations from the same blog:

February 21, 2019: "**I despise everyone in the pope's Roman meeting.** I despise them all." [bold print in the original];

February 25, 2019 [headline]: "Count the Holy See among the abusers";

[after McCarrick's dismissal]: "So, if the reigning pope had any real integrity as an honest judge, he would have recused himself altogether from the McCarrick case" [...] "**these days dangerous, dishonest Mafiosi run the one, true Church of Jesus Christ**" [bold text in the original].

Father White suggests that his blog has no effect on others, is not causing disunity nor inciting contempt for the Church and its leaders, and is otherwise a serious quest for spiritual good, open dialogue and true justice. However, a small sample of the responses to his posts imply otherwise.

From November 17, 2018 until now, Father White has acted in violation of promises he made at ordination by pushing the faithful to animosity against the Apostolic See, his bishop, and by injuring the good name of our Holy Father. To the degree Father White has persisted in this behavior against which he was previously warned on multiple occasions, I have tried to remedy this through conversation and admonition. I do not believe his comments, no matter what their intent, are appropriate or becoming of any pastor or priest, who is called to be "another Christ."

Although I am fully supportive of Father White's desire to have wrongs addressed in the Church, nothing I have said in person or by letter has convinced him to cease his divisiveness and discontinue issuing judgments and pronouncements against the hierarchy of the Church, or disseminating them without any regard for the consequences for the faithful or the Church universal, nor even for the good names of those with whom he was ordained to cooperate.



Lest one believe that the wrongs in the Church have not been addressed in our diocese, I note that I have met personally with victims of clergy sexual abuse, held listening sessions throughout our diocese, celebrated Masses of Atonement, addressed this topic in a pastoral letter, published the names of clergy against whom there were substantiated allegations of sexual abuse of minors, increased our staffing in the Office of Safe Environment and the hired a full-time Victims Assistance Coordinator, and, most recently, established an Independent Reconciliation Program.

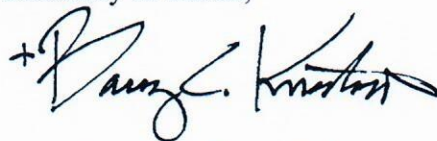
In a time of crisis for the Church and for our country, when worthy priestly ministry is so urgently needed, I desire to fulfill what has been instructed in the Gospel of St. Matthew 18:21-35, to forgive, “not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” From the beginning it has been my desire that Fr. White’s ministry in the diocese would be fruitful and effective, and that he provide that ministry as a happy and healthy priest. This ministry is needed even more during a time of distress for so many of our people. But it must be a ministry that unifies and builds the Body of Christ, not causes further discord.

Therefore, I have made the unprecedented decision to publicly present my concerns to the community where he serves. As members of this local faith community, I reach out to you, so you understand and hear from me the importance of this matter. My hope is that Fr. White might be encouraged to follow a more productive path of serving his parish community, without the use of language that is damaging, divisive and detrimental to the communion of the Church and the good names of those who serve her.

As a servant of Christ, each time I hold the crosier in my hand, I am reminded of the responsibility that has been entrusted to me as your shepherd. Chief among those responsibilities is guarding the faith. As shepherd, I do not want anyone to be lost or to stray to divisions in our Church. As St. Augustine of Hippo said: *“I shall recall the straying; I shall seek the lost. Whether they wish it or not, I shall do it. And should the brambles of the forests tear at me when I seek them, I shall force myself through all straits; I shall put down all hedges. So far as the God whom I fear grants me the strength, I shall search everywhere”*.

As your shepherd, I humbly ask for your prayers at this time and want you to know that you are in mine.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Barry C. Knestout". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross symbol to the left of the first letter.

Most Reverend Barry C. Knestout  
Bishop of Richmond