

*Bishop's Annual Address  
Convention of the Diocese of Massachusetts  
Saturday, November 8, 2014  
St. Stephen's Memorial Church, Lynn*

***Returning to a Changed Landscape***

On a visit to Ephesus a few years ago I was taken by the eager local guide to a grotto known as The Cave of the Seven Sleepers. According to the tale, a group of 3<sup>rd</sup> century Christians was swept up in the persecution under the Roman emperor Decius. The seven young men hide in a cave outside of Ephesus. After what they think is a long night's sleep, they wake up 180 years later, in the reign of the Christian emperor Theodosius II. Not realizing that all has changed, they send one of their number into town to buy some food. He is astonished to see churches and crosses everywhere. The townspeople are equally surprised when the man tries to buy bread with 180-year-old coins. Of course, soon the great miracle is understood, a great celebration is held, and – according to the hagiography, “the sleepers, having improved the occasion by a long discourse, then die praising God!” [www.newadvent.org]

I enjoyed visiting the grotto in Ephesus, and hearing the tale – which is thought to have been the inspiration for Washington Irving's more familiar story of Rip van Winkle. But it was not until this past summer that my wife Tricia and I began to feel that we might ourselves be latter-day members of The Seven Sleepers! Returning to Boston after an absence of 24 years, the landscape has been both familiar and not.

The Central Artery has disappeared! The Rose Kennedy Greenway is beautiful. Briarwood and Camp Dennen are gone. The Barbara C. Harris Camp & Conference Center is splendid. Battleship Cove still anchors the south coast; the Hammond Castle stands sentinel to the north. But the Hilltop Steak House sits silent and shuttered next to its landmark cactus. And – woe is us! – Bailey's Ice Cream Parlors are no more.

Such landmark changes are mirrored even more significantly by changes in the life of the church. Some of those changes represent deep and ongoing challenges. Attendance in many churches has declined; some have closed. The church as a whole does not have the presumed worth in the life of our communities that was still presumed in many places even a generation ago. But I must tell you that the life of the Diocese of Massachusetts is in many ways dramatically more healthy, more vibrant, and more mission-oriented than I experienced it to be twenty-five years ago. An on-again off-again moratorium on ordinations in those days, reacting to a perceived “clergy glut”, has now been replaced by a deep and energetic culture of call for church leadership, including a revitalized diaconate. Twenty-five years ago the clericus, despite very strong and faithful priests, was persistently derailed by fractious division. Now it feels broadly collegial, upholding differences as manifestation of Pauline complementarity. And our parishes, which too often yield to the surrounding culture of isolated congregational identity, are now engaged in far more collaborative ministries.

From the perspective of one who was ordained here, has been gone, and has now returned, I am eager to say that the Diocese of Massachusetts – for all our many challenges – is a place where Christian fellowship is evident, and the movement of the Holy Spirit is palpable. Thanks be to God.

***Big Shoes and New Shoes***

Here I would pause to pay homage to Bishop Tom Shaw. The positive changes which I have described in health, tone, and spirit in the Diocese of Massachusetts are, of course, the work of the Holy Spirit. But they cannot be separated from the leadership of Tom Shaw as an agent of that Spirit. He

may not actually have been, as we hear he once claimed, “the monk of the month.” But here he was the ‘diocesan of the double-decade,’ and the church was blessed.

A week ago we commended Tom to his Maker, with gratitude and with the sure and certain hope of eternal life. Last week’s liturgy was marked by a simple grandeur which expressed that hope. We offer our sincere thanks to the brothers of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, to its Superior, Brother Geoffrey Tristram, and to the people of Trinity Church, for the gift which that liturgy was to all of us.

Tom and I had both hoped to have a period for mentoring and companionship in this season of episcopal transition. That was not to be. Many people have told me that I have very large shoes to fill. True – except that I cannot fill Tom’s shoes, and I will not try. He wore his shoes. I must wear my own, and I rely on God’s grace to determine the style of those shoes and to provide the ‘sole.’

A number of people have also commented on a certain parallel in the way that Tom’s episcopate and mine have begun. It is true that in both cases we have begun our tenure at an accelerated pace, and with the death of our predecessor. But this, truly, is where the similarity begins and ends. I am very clear, and I want you to recollect clearly as well, that the circumstances which we now face as a diocese are altogether different than those in which Bishop Tom Shaw (with Bishop Barbara Harris alongside him) was required to shepherd us twenty years ago. We move forward now from a time of sorrow and regret, to be sure, but our sorrow is born not out of betrayal, but out of thanksgiving. Last week we proclaimed Tom’s resurrection in Christ, and we prayed that he go from strength to strength. This week we assert that our diocese is poised, in its own continuing life in Christ, to go from strength to strength. Thanks be to God.

### ***Listening While We Work***

So, here we are together for the third time in two months. We have had a consecration. We have had a funeral. Now we have a convention, in which we are invited to hold one another gently as we face forward with gratitude and hope. This convention will not be an occasion for the unveiling of dramatic changes, nor the outlining of new vision. I have said repeatedly, before last spring’s election and since, that I would understand my task for this first year to be that of historian and companion. I intend to spend as much time as we need together to hear the history – old stories and recent ones; for us to get to know one another and our mutual passions and yearnings. That is precisely my agenda. And it is underway.

A mentor of mine, as new bishop in his diocese, once said to his people: “You will grow impatient with my patience.” Indeed, you might. But I am convinced that the God of lightning bolts and volcanic eruptions is also the God of the turtle, the lichen, and the fermentation of yeast. Dare I say it: the God of the Damascus Road is also the God of the Emmaus Road! And I am certain that we will encounter God together on such a road in the year ahead.

In this connection, I note that according to Canon [10.2.d], the Diocesan Council would be required in the coming months to prepare a triennial Diocesan Mission Strategy to guide next summer’s budget preparation for the following year. In light of my determination to spend this year engaged in a Listening Tour, I believe our new or revised mission strategies and budget priorities will best be shaped in the year thereafter. An official resolution to reflect that revised timing will be presented later today.

But make no mistake. That does not mean we will be treading water or sitting idle in the mean time. The four mission priorities already articulated are driving our life together. Indeed, I have already been hearing the passion behind those strategies in my visitations around the diocese.

We have identified God’s urgent call for vital and viable congregations – which are still the front line of ministry in our neighborhoods and communities around eastern Massachusetts.

We have identified God’s urgent call to care for God’s creation – a call to which more and more individuals and congregations are responding, and one which asserts itself with ever greater intensity.

We have identified God's urgent call to raise up new generations in faith and leadership. This is a call which does not diminish the wisdom of our elders, but rather depends upon it. I hope you know that the way that this diocese has already begun to form young leaders for the church has been watched, admired, and emulated around the country.

We have identified God's urgent call to join God's mission in the world, through partnerships local and global. Here, too, we have seen exciting new collaborations, even as we see news demanding our response – from last week's displacement of nearly 800 homeless persons from Boston's Long Island Shelter, to the appalling martyrdoms at churches in Pakistan and on village hillsides in Syria.

No doubt new mission priorities will emerge, but friends, we have no shortage of work to do on those to which we have already committed, and I am thrilled to be joining you in that work as it continues.

### ***Desiring Different Discourse***

I want to say a word about one current concern which has arisen in my conversations around the diocese more often than any other single matter, and that is deep distress about controversy in our seminaries. From older clergy it has often been expressed as grief over what such conflict portends for the future of beloved alma maters. From younger leaders I have heard repeated expressions of confusion and even embarrassment, at what seems to be the confirming of their peers' generational distrust of religious institutions. How, they ask, are they to convince their peers that the church represents a different set of values in the face of events which, as reported, seem only to mirror secular institutions in their handling of power and conflict?

Like many of you, I have friends and people I respect on both sides of this conflict. It grieves the heart. The spiral of conflict at General Seminary has provided a stark cautionary tale for those of us concerned to see a positive path forward at EDS. EDS has no structural or administrative relationship with this diocese. However, as a grateful alumnus of EDS, and as the Bishop of a diocese which relies deeply and thankfully on EDS for the training of so many of its leaders, I urge all parties to embrace a spirit of forbearance and mutual respect. I offer my personal support, and that of the office of the Bishop of Massachusetts, in whatever ways might help to promote a constructive way forward.

Ten years ago, Episcopal Divinity School published a handbook for the conducting of dialogue in the midst of conflict. It was entitled "Good News: A Congregational Resource for Reconciliation." The Introduction articulated its purpose:

*[T]o promote a fair and respectful dialogue among persons who hold different opinions, to offer a context of reflection on the shared values of the gospel, and to encourage a process of reconciliation within the life of the community. ... Anything that would tend to subvert these goals by offering a return to familiar soapboxes should be avoided. [p. 7]*

This document provides principles which should guide us all. As a highlighted text box in the workbook put it: "In the end, when asked what was the most important thing for people to do, Jesus did not say that it was for them to be 'right.' He said it was for them to love." In our pursuit of the truth, it matters how we treat one another. It truly does.

Which brings me finally to today's Convention. This afternoon we will take up several resolutions, some of which touch upon matters of contention. The resolutions have been submitted with faithful conviction. I have no doubt they will be debated with equally faithful conviction. Let us begin with the assumption that everyone in this place wishes earnestly to do the right thing, even while disagreeing on the ways to that end. Let us model something different than the polarized and bitter invective of contemporary culture. Let us debate without impugning motive, disagree without demonizing. Let us display our conviction that it really does matter how we treat one another – for surely it does.

Have you seen the photo of a demonstrator at the nation's capitol? She holds a placard which reads: "WHAT DO WE WANT? Respectful discourse! WHEN DO WE WANT IT? Now would be agreeable to me. But I am interested in your opinion."

### *Is It Real?*

A week ago yesterday evening, Tricia and I boarded the T. It was Halloween. I was wearing my clericals. I sat down next to a young woman who stared at me long and hard and then said, "Is that real, or is it just a costume?"

I thought: "Funny. I've been wondering the same thing myself." Being your bishop is the most extraordinary responsibility. I am delighted to be your bishop. But I don't mind telling you, it takes a little getting used to! And it demands knowing that the get-up is real, and not just a costume. As I said to the cathedral congregation on the morning after the consecration, if the mitre were to be an expression of historical practice only, a pointing backward only and not forward – well then, it would be mere costumery and nostalgia, and scarcely worth the cost it took to make it.

No, there must be congruity: a connection between our peculiar symbols and the life we are striving to live in the world. The demand for such congruity – between word and deed, between costumery and actual leadership – is a burden which was placed quite literally on my head in September. God help me. But I am not alone in this challenge. For such congruity is equally the task of every Christian person. This is your task too. God help us all.

As your bishop I expect that you will hold me accountable for fulfilling the vows you heard me take. And I expect that as your bishop I am meant to hold you accountable in just the same way.

That welcome sign outside your church: Is it real, or is it just a prop?

That cross around your neck: Is it real, or is it just jewelry?

The faith which brought you here today: Is it real, or is it just a costume?

Individually and together, may we put on garments of praise and righteousness which are real – as real as the grace of God which is the only thing capable of equipping us to make it so.

I thank you, dear friends – for the sacredness of your trust, for the warmth of your welcome, for the depth of your prayers, and for the very great joy of your companionship.

*The Rt. Rev. Alan M. Gates  
Bishop XVI of Massachusetts*