



Diocese of Johannesburg

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE ANGLICAN BISHOP DIOCESE OF JOHANNESBURG



Our Vision is: To Achieve the Practice of the Ministry of All Believers

PASTORAL LETTER

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Dear Saints

Some years ago, the Franciscan theologian, Richard Rohr, spoke of what he called "hot-mess times" in which we were then living. That was before the Covid era. As I was writing this letter to you today, I opened Rohr's latest meditation in which he reminded us that we were *still* living in perilous times. As such, he said, as Christians we had to answer the question, "Who are we to be?" His answer was instructive, and a reminder to an African audience of just how much the world has learnt from our own ancient heritage.

"We can answer this question with diminished imagination, by closing ranks with our tribe and hiding from our human responsibility to heal the world. Or we can answer the question of who we are to be in another way: We can answer it in the spirit of *ubuntu*. The concept comes from the Zulu phrase *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which literally means that a person is a person through other people. Another translation is, "I am who I am because we are who we are". . . With this in mind, *who I will be* is deeply related to *who you are*. In other words, we are each impacted by the circumstances that impact those around us. What hurts you hurts me. What heals you heals me. What causes you joy causes me to rejoice, and what makes you sad also causes me to weep," says Rohr.

I repeat this in full because as a diocese we are at a moment in our history when there is a frightening disconnect between some of our parishes and the diocese. Anger, confusion and discord over the challenges - not least over our financial situation as a diocese - on the part of some of our leaders, lay and clergy, have reached boiling point and are deepening existing cleavages. Emails and other social media communications fly around in which serious and often justifiable questions are asked of the diocese, but often couched in hurtful language. Of course, at this time of our diocesan year, the pressure is on parishes to submit their annual reports, including financial, for verification. I know this creates stress, especially in these tough economic times and in an age of "the hot-mess". For, make no mistake, South Africa is herself at crossroads, socio-economically and politically, in a world that faces similar challenges.

In the midst of this I prayerfully ponder why it is that some of the good people in this diocese readily lend their energy to what seems to me to be a movement to discredit people, including some of the diocesan staff whose duty it is to collate all the parish returns, and some of the volunteers who are hard at work to correct the situation that created the financial challenges now faced. Why is it that one's preaching of the need for ubuntu, for kindness and gentleness, and unity, go unheeded? I have written often in these pastoral letters, and preached many times, of this requirement for us to flourish as a Christian community. I have often reminded us that God is Love, and Love is God. It's a kernel of our belief as Anglicans. Sometimes I have rejoiced as we seem to grasp at such a unified expression of love, but I am sad to say that it does not last. I understand that people get angry and frustrated, and question their trust of others. But I don't understand the negative way in which they, as Christians, use their anger as a negative force. To say that I now despair would not be an understatement.

It was as I was reflecting on this that a member of our diocese pointed me to a sermon preached on Sunday 6 February 2022 in the First Congregational Church of Los Angeles by its senior pastor, Revd Laura Vail Fregen. In her sermon, Revd Laura used the book, "All about Love" by activist Gloria Jean Watkins under her penname "bell hooks". In her sermon Revd Laura relates the story, told in her book, of how bell hooks went to see a Buddhist monk, Tikan Han, who was known as "Mr Peace". She felt anything but peaceful going to meet him, writes bell hooks, with feelings of racism, sexism and many other negative thoughts passing through her mind. When she sat down with the monk, she burst out with the words, "I am so angry!" The story concludes with Mr Peace saying, "Hold on to your anger *and use it as compost in your garden*".

As Africans we all understand the immense value of compost. Well prepared and applied, it provides crops in abundance, and enriches our lives. As Revd Laura says, using anger as compost becomes energy that can be recycled in the direction of our good. In this way, anger is empowering. Otherwise it becomes debilitating and destructive.

Love was the central theme of bell hooks' life. Love is at the beginning and end of our lives and all the places in between, says Revd Laura.

Love illuminates all things. bell hooks also wrote of how the practice of love can make people who are socially uncomfortable with it nervous or even scared. But love, as we as Anglicans repeat Sunday after Sunday, speak about in our meetings, and sing about in our hymns and psalms, has the possibility to change this cultural crisis we are all swimming in. And to overcome any other crisis.

As a people who overcame apartheid through love in action, there can be no way we do not understand this.

Like Rohr, bell hooks wrote extensively about our culture being in crisis - a spiritual and political (social) crisis. I believe that what confronts us as a people in this diocese is the age-old struggle of dualism; separating the spiritual from the economic, or political (with a small p in our case as a Church) or social. Richard Rohr sums it all up for us in his meditation today: Quoting Julian of Norwich, who says: "The divisions, dichotomies, and dualisms of the world can only be overcome by a *unitive consciousness* at every level: personal, relational, social, political, cultural, in inter-religious dialogue, and spirituality in particular.

Julian of Norwich used the Old English term 'oneing' to describe what happens between God and the soul. As Julian put it, 'By myself I am nothing at all; but in general I am, I hope, in the oneing of love . . . for it is in this oneing that the life of all people consists'."

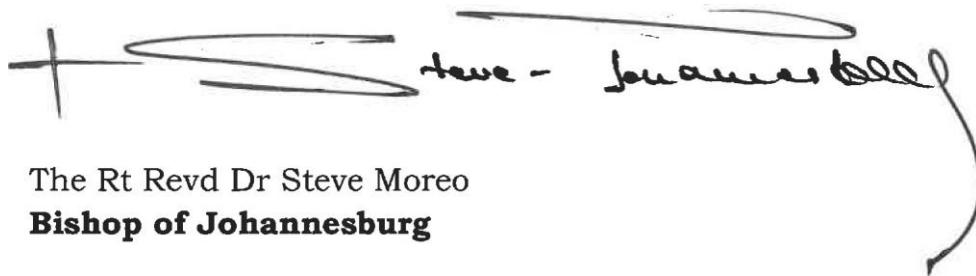
Lent begins in just three weeks. During that time, we will surely learn all over again about the God of Love and the Love of God. We will celebrate this great truth of our faith in the dark moment of Good Friday and the glorious morning of Resurrection, Easter Sunday. How can we, in the light of this, even think of continuing to hurt, when we know that what hurts the other hurts you; so too for sadness. We are all bound up in this oneness. There is no duality. Love is our only potion.

Let me leave you with the Scripture that Revd Laura also used during her sermon, from Luke 6, which has that memorable verse, "Do to others as you would have them

do to you." But I ask you to take a moment now and read this passage (Luke 6:27 - 38). Then ask yourself if you and others around you in your Christian life truly represent that **God is Love, and Love is God**? Hold this before you throughout Lent.

I send you my own love as your Bishop.

Grace and Peace!

A handwritten signature in black ink. It begins with a simple cross symbol on the left. To the right of the cross are several horizontal, wavy lines. The signature then reads "Steve - Joannes Moreo" in a cursive script. A long, thin, curved line extends from the end of the signature downwards and to the right.

Steve - Joannes Moreo

The Rt Revd Dr Steve Moreo
Bishop of Johannesburg