



**ROMAN CATHOLIC
DIOCESE of ORANGE**

PASTORAL CENTER: BISHOP'S OFFICE

13280 CHAPMAN AVENUE, GARDEN GROVE, CA 92840

Sept. 24, 2021

Dear friends,

As we gather in Faith and Thanksgiving today to pray for the repose of the soul of Bishop Peter Esterka, I ask you to consider what he would have asked of us: No matter the circumstances of life, follow Christ faithfully – always.

After I was appointed Bishop of the Diocese of Orange, I came to know Bishop Esterka through his dedication to the many Catholics of Czech heritage and others through his service at St. Norbert's and St. Mary's in Fullerton, California.

It was a blessing to observe closely how dedicated he was to his mission of serving our Catholic brothers and sisters.

He once told me that he wanted to retire, but he could not because there was no one else appointed to his position. Therefore, the Holy See asked that he continue. Though he was older, and no longer had the energy of his youth, he continued.

On those days when I considered my responsibilities and how I could best fulfill them, or how I could meet my many obligations, Bishop Esterka's unending dedication and the great efforts he went to were often a source of inspiration.

He was a great role model – ne plus ultra.

Early on, his initiative was revealed in his ministry as a missionary tasked with doing everything with the resources at hand, as well as those he somehow managed to raise. People were drawn to him. He energized their desire to support and assist. He began a ministry in Minnesota that focused on the divorced and remarried in the diocese. At the time, this was unheard of.

He did all of this while he was a full-time university professor, and a chaplain in the Air Force Reserves. When the Jesuit priest who was serving the Czech missions in California died, and there was no one to take his place. He took early retirement, moving to California in 1991. He lived in the homes of his people until he was given a place at St. Mary's in Fullerton, and later at St. Norbert's in Orange.

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His philosophy of ministry was fundamental:

Go out to the people. Do not sit in the sacristy waiting for them to come to you.

I recall reading about the Iron Curtain during the 1950s, and the persecution of the Church there. Europe was far away and it did not affect me directly. Or so I thought. But through knowing the Cistercians in Dallas, Texas who escaped Hungary, and likewise our Norbertines here – especially Father Gerlach, and most recently Bishop Esterka – I was able to envision the courage and faith necessary to meet the daily challenges of life.

To this day, the life and courage of Bishop Esterka serves as a great perspective of Faith and how to live.

In his book, “Never Say Comrade,” Bishop Esterka wrote about his escape from communism. When he realized he would never be allowed to practice his faith or be educated in his own country, he made plans to leave – illegally.

Even though he could not share his plans with his family, his father somehow knew and encouraged him to do what was necessary. He was very close to his father, often noting that he was ordained a bishop on September 11 – his father's birthday.

He was always annoyed when anyone wrote that he “emigrated.” It was dismissive of the danger and fear that had to be overcome in order to escape. It was an act of hope – and a belief in a better future.

The Gospel for the Mass of the Resurrection (John 14) reminds us how Bishop Esterka prepared the way for the Lord in so many places and for so many people in so many far-flung places.

Now we pray with him and for him on the path and the way that the Lord has prepared for Him.

“Well done good and faithful servant, enter now into the joy of your Lord.”

Kevin W. Vann

Most Reverend Kevin W. Vann, J.C.D., D.D.

Bishop of Orange in California