

Denise Donato

Responses to Questions for Auxiliary Bishop Candidates

October 28, 2017

1. The role of bishop, including auxiliary bishop, has been described as teacher and shepherd in the ECC. What does that mean to you and how do you feel you are prepared for that role?

While the role of teacher and shepherd are distinctly defined as a part of the bishop's role, they are definitely important qualities for the presbyters as well. I believe my experience in church ministry best equips me for the roles of teacher and shepherd. I bring with me 22 years of experience in ministry. My first 7 years were as the Family Minister at Corpus Christi and later Spiritus Christi, and my past 15 years has been as a priest, 7 years at Spiritus Christi and the past 8 years as pastor of Mary Magdalene Church.

As a shepherd, I enjoy walking with people on their journeys through life, but I do so with an eye to help guide people. I often do this gently by asking questions, pointing out observations and suggest different ways of addressing situations. In this way I find that people are better able to accept this guidance without becoming defensive. People need to know they are cared for, valued and respected.

As a teacher my experience comes through preaching, leading Bible Studies and other programs, as well as children's ministry and preparing people for sacraments. Formerly as a family minister and now as a pastor there is an element of teaching in almost every aspect of my work, from assuring those who are dying of the life that awaits them on the other side, and even countering some of the narrow aspects of religion that have caused pain untold pain in people's lives. In many ways the role of teaching and shepherding go hand in hand.

2. What would be your top priorities in the first 90 days in this role?

I will admit that this question threw me a bit, as my role is fairly well defined as an auxiliary bishop. In his letter to delegates dated 8/12/17 Bishop Frank delineated the two roles he has as the presiding bishop. These are the roles of presiding and the role of bishop. As he said, "In every area of the Communion that is not covered by our two local dioceses, the PB is that territory's bishop, providing pastoral oversight and sacramental ministry and receiving new parishes and clergy according to the processes of our constitution." He went on to say: "*I need help in my role as ordinary for most of the country and Europe, now.* This has led us on the Episcopal Council to consider the notion of a suffragan or auxiliary bishop who would assist me, not in my role as "president" of the Communion, but in my role as "bishop ordinary" to the majority of the Communion's communities and territory." (This territory was defined by the map he distributed along with his letter.)

As an auxiliary bishop it is paramount that I work closely with Bishop Francis. In the beginning especially, it will be important to spend some time with him, clarifying this role and defining how we will work together. I will also need to learn various types of liturgies and my role in these. And, it's very important to learn more about the communities, clergy, delegates and individuals that make up the regions I will serve.

I do see a unique opportunity being a female bishop and that is to reach out to Roman Catholic Women Priests (RCWP), the Federation of Christian Ministers and other reform

organizations that have women clergy. Establishing lines of communication and connection will be important and will take some time. When the time is right, all of this will be done with the full knowledge and support of Bishop Frank.

3. What needs of the ECC and of the various communities will you fulfill in the role of auxiliary bishop, and how would you make this role effective for the ECC and communities?

It is my understanding that as an auxiliary bishop I will share in the sacramental ministry, as well as any episcopal pastoral oversight and travel as directed by Bishop Frank. If there are individuals or communities that approach me with a request, that request will be discussed with Bishop Frank, before I make any commitments. As auxiliary bishop, I see my role as being very tied to the presiding bishop as I will be assisting him as he desires.

In regard to making this role effective for the ECC, I believe that involves working closely with the vicars, clergy, delegates, parish councils and others who are directly responsible and directly involved in the situation(s) at hand. Those who are “on the ground” are the ones who will in many ways be the “experts.” I believe it is extremely important to honor their role in the communities or regions involved. As such, it is important to realize that those experts are not just those who are ordained! Lay leaders are equally important. In many ways, my work will be informed and shaped by all those who are directly involved in the community or region I am called to serve.

4. How do you think your role as bishop will complement the work of the Episcopal Council?

I believe that bringing a female voice to the Episcopal Council will definitely complement the work that they do and the ways that they will experience different aspects of our life as a communion. As I've said before, our roots in the ECC come from an institution within which patriarchy, sexism and clericalism were embedded for millennium. We have done beautiful and wonderful things as a Communion to break the 'isms from which we came, but we do not change this overnight. As a woman I'm in the unique position of being able to bring a different perspective to the faith, traditions, rituals, sacraments, and theology that we all love!! Being able to bring this perspective allows us to “ponder” in different ways. When we move away from a position of defending and into a position of pondering we allow the Holy Spirit to move and breathe between and among us.

All of that may sound like I intend to “shake things up,” or that I think I'm an “expert” or that I think I have a clarity that others lack! Please note that, first of all, this is not who I am!! Secondly, I love my Catholicism with its faith, traditions, rituals, sacraments and theology. I simply experience it differently due to my gender than those who are male, and I will bring this to the Episcopal Council. This is also not to say I speak for all women!! That would be naïve and narcissistic! I will simply bring ONE female perspective to a council that is currently made up of all men. That perspective is not more important than the perspective of anyone else on the council, it simply sheds a different light.

Finally, I honor and look up to the experience, wisdom and clarity of our Episcopal Council. I very much look forward to the ways that they will inform and shape me, as well as the ways I may inform and shape them. I believe this will add richness to our work.

5. How will your home parish support you? How will you and your home parish deal with the new requirements on your time and attention that this role will demand?

This is something I have worked on with my board and through my communication with the community. Fortunately, we have a wonderful minister, Philip Benier, who served for many years as an ordained Presbyterian minister. He is in the process of seeking a conditional ordination within the ECC. He currently covers for me when I am out of town. As a community, we are in the process of bringing him on as an associate who will be preaching regularly and presiding with me when I am in town, and fully covering when I am not.

In addition, I believe that our community is ready for this. We have very dedicated parishioners who already are very involved in every aspect of community life. While I know it will be difficult at times, and people will miss me being with them every Sunday, it is an opportunity for the community to grow in depth and dedication. I've always said that Mary Magdalene Church is not "my" church. We are established in such a way that the community is responsible in large part for our direction and our character. I believe this has come at the right time for the community to actualize that!!

6. Do you have any questions for us, or anything else you think we should know?

I will close by saying that it is especially important to be clear that I will be serving as an **auxiliary** bishop, assisting Bishop Frank in serving the ECC at the locations and in the tasks that he asks me to take on. I wish to avoid any appearance that I will be serving in a presiding role! This is not the role, nor is it my intention or desire.