

Essay Responses
The Rev. Susan Fortunato

Prompt 1

• **A wise priest once said, “The best thing you can ever do for your ministry is have a life outside the Church.” Tell us about your support network and what is especially life-giving in your life outside the Church. What does your daily prayer life look like? What sustains you in your relationship with God?**

I am blessed to have a full and joy-filled life, both inside and outside the Church. My support network begins with my wife, Catherine Gorlin, and includes our two little dogs—Buster, a Westie, and Xavi, a rescue mix—who bring laughter and warmth into our home. My son, Graham, and his wife, Kimberlee, are expecting their first child this January. They join us regularly for weekend dinners, holidays, and occasional vacations—I cherish those connections.

I’m fortunate to have close friendships from every chapter of my life—some going back to nursery school, high school, and seminary, and others formed through the shared journey of parenting. These long-standing relationships continue to sustain me. I also have two brothers and extended family in Texas, and we remain close despite the distance.

Spending time outdoors is one of the most restorative parts of my life. I run several times a week and enjoy discovering new hiking trails with my family. We also love kayaking and take every opportunity to explore rivers, lakes, and the New England coastline. A few years ago, we bought a small house in Saratoga County, New York, which has become a place of retreat, reflection, and family time.

My daily prayer practice currently includes intercessory prayer, journaling, and the Daily Office. Like many Christians, I adjust my spiritual disciplines from time to time—*lectio divina*, in particular, is a practice I return to often. I meet regularly with a spiritual director who helps me stay attentive to the ways God is moving in my life. I also find meaning in the simple, everyday things—sermon preparation, a walk with the dogs, lunch with a colleague, or a quiet run outside.

What sustains my relationship with God most deeply is the practice of gratitude. About twelve years ago, I received a fortune cookie message that read, “Treasure what you have.” Odd as it sounds, that phrase has become a personal mantra. I strive to be thankful not only for the many blessings in my life, but also for the challenges I’ve been entrusted to face. I believe deeply in God’s faithfulness and in God’s ability to provide more than I can ask or imagine.

My best days are those when I remember that whatever pastoral or personal challenge lies before me, it is never mine to carry alone. God will provide. My role is not to have all the answers, but to remain faithful, grateful, and humble—holding space in my life for God’s presence and purpose to be revealed.

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Prompt 2

• In the bishop's ordination vows the candidate is asked: "Will you boldly proclaim and interpret the Gospel of Christ, enlightening the minds and stirring up the conscience of your people?" How do you interpret the Gospel? How are you living out this charge in your current life and ministry?

For me, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the radical, healing, and transformative love of God—greater than we can ever fully comprehend. It calls us to love everyone, especially those whom society often rejects or fears: undocumented migrants, drag queens, January 6th rioters, the unhoused, the mentally ill, and those in prison.

My understanding of the Gospel is grounded in the conviction that God's love and forgiveness offer the deepest healing we can experience. The word "salvation" derives from the Latin *salvus*, meaning "health." Salvation is not only a personal experience but a communal one—a healing of ourselves, our communities, and the world. The Resurrection makes real in our lives God's love, which is stronger than death, and invites us into new life, even in our darkest moments. Hope, fueled by grace, is never extinguished.

This theological foundation shapes how I live and minister. My public advocacy on issues such as migration, human sexuality, racism, and homelessness in the Hudson Valley arises from my Gospel convictions. I currently serve on the Mayor's Council on the Homeless and was recently appointed as a liaison between the Hudson Valley faith community and the Governor's office. I have addressed the Dutchess County Legislature, hosted public forums, written for *The Living Church*, advocated for increased resources, and encouraged local religious leaders to join me in publicly supporting our most vulnerable neighbors. Because of my deep relationships formed locally with both the powerful and the powerless, I am able to articulate our City's real needs in an effective way that results in community action.

Perhaps my clearest expression of living the Gospel is through my work with the unhoused. From November to April, my church hosts a Warming Center that provides shelter for around thirty guests each night. Several times a week, I walk through the center, greet guests by name, and ask how they are doing. On Christmas Day, our parish hall becomes a shared space of joy and dignity, for parishioner and shelter guest alike: with board games, old movies, a lot of delicious food, and, most importantly, time spent together as equals and friends.

My advocacy for the unhoused has also served as an invitation for parishioners to become more deeply connected and personally involved with those experiencing homelessness. The Outreach Committee organizes an annual Advent drive, collecting gloves, scarves, socks, and other cold-weather essentials. Church members sign up to make soup for our Warming Center and homemade muffins for breakfast. Through table fellowship, meaningful relationships have formed between the Warming Center guests and members of the church.

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Each winter, many of our unhoused neighbors have joined us for worship—several have stayed and become parishioners. One young man found permanent housing across the street from the church. A parishioner generously donated her used car so he could get to work. He now has permanent housing, transportation, a job, and sings in our choir.

Ultimately, the gospel is almost always best experienced through the lives of those we touch.

Prompt 3

• **Our pastoral need is to have a strong and prophetic leader who will strategically equip and mobilize us for mission and ministry. Describe a time that you equipped and mobilized people for a particular ministry.**

Throughout my career, I have mobilized and equipped others for ministry in many ways from re-organizing a food cupboard to reshaping the Episcopal presence at Vassar College to shifting to online worship in March 2020. However, the first (and last time) I was quoted in *The New York Times* stands out as particularly significant, so I will share that story.

In 2016, a group of parishioners approached me about sponsoring a refugee family. Our church had previously supported Cambodian refugees in the 1970s, an experience that had been profoundly meaningful. One newer member had relocated to the area from a church in the South, where he had been actively involved in resettling refugees.

While I recognized the importance of this ministry, I was concerned about the financial and logistical demands of sponsoring a refugee family. I wanted to ensure that our parish could sustain this effort without being overwhelmed. To begin, I guided the group through gathering support by presenting their vision to the Outreach Committee and, later, to the vestry. These parishioners gained confidence and motivated others by sharing their previous direct experience with refugees. The Outreach Committee and the Vestry responded with overwhelming encouragement.

Next, I sought out local partners. We deepened existing connections with Vassar College, Vassar Temple, and the Mid-Hudson Islamic Center, forming a coalition that would be named the Mid-Hudson Refugee Solidarity Alliance.

Our plan was to integrate efforts across these organizations. Vassar College students would assist with transportation, English lessons, grocery shopping, and financial literacy, while faith communities would provide hands-on support and share the financial costs. We pledged to provide financial assistance for one year, allowing families time to adjust to their new country.

Each faith-based community would take turns sponsoring a family. Christ Church was selected to go first because of our organizational capacity, financial resources, and prior experience, maximizing our chances of success. Together, we decided to work with Church World Services, which had just opened a regional office in Poughkeepsie.

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Our efforts were complicated by the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and his subsequent refugee ban. However, our family—Masu, Roza, Nathalie, Kwizi, and Leo—was fortunate to be among the last able to leave Africa for the United States that year, arriving in the middle of a snowstorm on January 31, 2017.

My role was to support the parishioners who coordinated volunteers and ensure that relationships with our community partners remained strong. I spoke at community meetings, listened to neighbors' concerns, and addressed local media on the importance of “welcoming the stranger.” The leaders of our team meanwhile worked directly with the family, helping the adults find work and making sure that the children had adequate support to make the transition to life in America. As the political climate shifted, we joined together in marches to protest the refugee ban, motivated by our direct relationship with a refugee family and the urgent need of those still trapped in refugee camps across the world.

Prompt 4

• **In your current ministry context, how are you collaborating with others to foster multicultural or multilingual ministry?**

My current ministry context offers rich opportunities for multicultural and multilingual collaboration. Iglesia de la Virgen de Guadalupe is the sister parish of Christ Church, where I serve as rector. Founded in the mid-1980s to serve a growing community of Mexican immigrants—primarily from Oaxaca—this congregation shares our worship space but maintains its own governance and financial independence.

I've worked to build relationships with parishioners by hosting an annual Posada at the rectory and participating in special celebrations, particularly the Feast of the Virgin of Juquila. In 2019, I attended the Diocesan Spanish Language Immersion Institute in Cuernavaca, Mexico, to study the language and experience Mexican culture firsthand. That experience deepened my understanding and helped me connect more authentically with the local Mexican community. One small but meaningful outcome was the introduction of holy water for anyone who wished to use it, inspired by its ubiquity in Mexican churches.

When the long-time priest-in-charge of Our Lady of Guadalupe retired in December 2023, the Diocese of New York was also in transition and couldn't provide immediate support. Because of the relationships I had built with the congregation—despite not speaking Spanish fluently—I was able to arrange supply clergy and help adjust the worship schedule. This change allowed us to bring in a nearby Hispanic priest who now leads their services regularly. The parish continues to thrive.

In 2022, a man who had recently moved from Brooklyn approached us with the idea of teaching English as a Second Language. Stephen Haff and I have worked closely to develop "Still Waters" in Poughkeepsie, which now operates as a ministry of Christ Church. Stephen uses art—especially

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creative writing—to help migrants learn English. His latest project, a podcast retelling *A Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, features students from China, Mauritania, Mexico, Guatemala, and Sudan sharing their own stories.

As a church, we also collaborate with interfaith partners on various initiatives. In recent years, we've been honored to participate in Eid al-Fitr, which includes free health screenings for the homeless and a communal feast. Currently, we're planning an event with the Dutchess County Human Rights Commission and the Jewish Federation titled *Breaking Bread, Building Bridges: Connecting in Community*. This Fall gathering will bring together our church and a local synagogue to foster deeper interfaith connections.

It is essential for congregations to grow in ways that reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of the communities we serve. Building bridges across differences is ongoing—and sacred. Pentecost reminds us that the Holy Spirit meets us in our differences, not to erase them, but to deepen our understanding. Just as the disciples spoke in many tongues and were understood by all, we are called to create spaces where every voice is heard and every culture honored. Through the Spirit's guidance that we can recognize Christ in one another and walk together as one body.

Prompt 5

• **Tell us why you feel persuaded to serve as Bishop of the Diocese of Western Massachusetts during this time and season in our life together.**

Last April, I attended the CREDO conference in Oakhurst, California, near Yosemite National Park. As many clergy know, CREDO offers a sacred space to reflect deeply on vocation, to assess one's strengths and vulnerabilities, and to discern what core values are most alive in this current season of ministry. It's an invitation we receive every seven years—and always one of the most meaningful conferences I attend. This time, the values that emerged for me were effectiveness, resiliency, joy, health, and authenticity. Those five core values have since shaped my prayer, my work, and my discernment.

When I read the profile of the Diocese of Western Massachusetts, I was struck by how closely I identified with your history, your current context, and your dreams for the future. The Diocese feels culturally, theologically, and geographically like home. The complexity of your urban centers, the challenges and joys of your suburban parishes, and the rich cultural and natural treasures of the Berkshires together reflect the kind of diocese I long to serve—a place where the Church's diverse callings are lived out in real time and real community.

Western Massachusetts, like the Hudson Valley where I now serve, inhabits a kind of liminal space. We are shaped by the energy of Boston and New York, but not wholly defined by them. We hold space for both rural tradition and progressive thought. Our churches often speak with a hopeful and prophetic voice, even while our neighbors may not always share the same theological or political

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worldview. In such a space, we are called to preach the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ with clarity, humility, and grace. We must embody a faith that is intelligible, meaningful, and compelling to those who are both inside and outside the church.

I am drawn to your desire for a bishop who will build the kinds of structures and supports that foster healthy ministry. I hear your longing to remain a diocese knit together not by uniformity, but by deep relationships, collegiality, and mutual respect. I affirm your vision for creative, locally rooted liturgical life that reflects the needs and gifts of your communities. These are not only aspirations I understand—they are values I hold dear.

I do not know if I am called to be your next bishop. But I do know that I feel called to offer myself fully and faithfully to this process. What I hear in your collective voice is a diocese that seeks a bishop who will walk with you—humbly, joyfully, and authentically—as you follow Christ into what’s next. I feel persuaded to discern with you because your hopes resonate with the deep call that God continues to place on my life.

May the Holy Spirit guide us in this season of listening and trust.