

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

For Your Third Day — Thank You, Lord!

(The following is the closing address delivered at the First Convocation of the Diocesan Pastoral Council of Rochester, New York on June 15, 1975. The setting was the Gymnasium Auditorium on the Campus dedicated to the Diocesan Patronal Saint, John Fisher, who presided over the destinies of the Diocese of Rochester, England, and who suffered martyrdom for his witness to the faith in the XVI Century. He was assigned by Pope John XXIII as our patronal saint on June 9, 1961.)

My brother bishops, Dennis and John, and my fellow bishops, beloved People of God of the Church of Rochester. The second part of my salutation was borrowed from St. Augustine who, 1600 years before Vatican II, had a deep grasp on the meaning of shared responsibility.



Centuries ago, there was a **third day**.

For three years or so a small group of disciples, in response to a call, had entertained a vision of faith which filled them with wonder and promise. Through good times and bad, they clung to that commitment. Often they wondered where it might all lead. Then, with a stunning suddenness, there came a two-day ordeal which put their faith to its most difficult test. Their fondest hope was confronted by fear, doubt, weariness. Little wonder they cringed at what the morrow might bring.

But there was a third day.

And the splendor of the Resurrection lifted the burden from their heavy hearts. For that third day redeemed the days of toil and the years of wondering. Their faith had not been in vain. In brief, a third day enkindled their fondest hope — the first of many third days in the history of the Church. Only a song of heartfelt inspiration would be worthy of the occasion, and the Church uses it each Easter to thank God that the third day was not limited to a single moment in history:

This is the Lord's doing;
it is marvellous in our eyes.
This is the day which the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
(Ps 118:23-24)

Today, as the local Church of Rochester, we gather to celebrate another third day. Like the first Easter, it drives away all doubt and fear. It turns all pain and agony into gladness. It braces us for an open-ended future which God asks us to dare boldly, to shape fittingly, and to share willingly, "as a people of His very own, enthusiastic for good works." (Titus 2:14)

Today, then, is a truly glorious day in the annals of our diocese. When some future historian will write the post-Vatican II segment of our history, the event we are engaged in today, the launching of a Diocesan Pastoral Council, may well be an outstanding chapter. Because our own words and our collective presences are not equal to the solemnity of the occasion, we rely upon the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist to make our celebration of this day worthy and befitting. Because the occasion is so very special, let me turn to a passage of Psalm 118 which was used by the Old Testament People of God to celebrate their very special feasts:

We beg you, Yahweh, give victory!
we beg you, Yahweh, send prosperity!
Yahweh has truly shone upon us!

You are my God and I thank you,
my God, I extol you.
Give thanks to Yahweh for he is good;
for his kindness is eternal.

(Ps 118:25, 27, 28-29)

THE READINGS

If the occasion is not blessing enough, today's Liturgy of the Word presents to us three magnificent readings — none of which can be improved upon for appropriateness. The theme is a call to mission — providentially, appointed for today's readings.

Anyone who reads Scripture regularly will eventually realize that the call to mission given to the key biblical figures falls into a fourfold pattern:

First, a divine invitation with an encounter. In effect, God poses the crucial question: "Will you?"

Second, a response of acceptance. The answer expected is: "I will!"

Next, a deepening self-awareness emerges — The subject probes: "Who am I?"

Finally, a commission is given. Thus says the Lord: Do this!

Today's Readings fit that pattern perfectly.

First Reading (Ex 19:2-6)

In our first Reading, Moses guides a motley, disoriented mob of Israelite slaves, back to the very spot where his own unbelievable venture had started some time earlier. For Moses the occasion is a rendezvous (cf. Ex 3), while for Israel it is an initial encounter with the Lord. Never were more comforting words spoken against a more unlikely scene: in the shadow of Sinai's jagged peak, described by one writer as "God's gigantic clenched fist" (Beno Rothenberg); the Lord announces to the confused desert wanderers that they will be his very own, **his special possession**, dearer to his heart than all other people.

The Lord God Who alone controlled the entire world, had indeed singled out a special portion to be his one and only, his unique possession, Israel.

How staggering the thought that these slaves, who just a few short weeks before were being trampled under the grinding heel of their Egyptian taskmaster, would soon be called to a sense of national purpose. It is even more difficult to believe that these emancipated slaves were being invited by a divinely intimate love to enter into a personal relationship with the Lord God. Even more, Israel was being called to function as a "kingdom of priests, a consecrated nation." The upshot was that Israel was "to have the special privilege of priests, to be allowed to 'draw near' God, and . . . to do 'service' for all the world." (Martin Noth, *Exodus*, p. 157) Such was the net result of Israel's encounter with the covenant God who would describe himself as her creator and her kinsman. (Cf. Is 49:26)

Hard to believe? Indeed! But faith is never easy — just overwhelmingly true!

Responsorial Psalm (100:1-2, 3, 5)

The Responsorial Psalm clearly states Israel's acceptance of that divine invitation: "We are his people, the sheep of his flock." It is difficult to determine whether the statement is one of commitment or celebration. Perhaps it does not matter. What does matter is that our response to God's invitations is just a matter of three simple

words: "Let it be." And the divine ratification is itself just a matter of three simple words: "So it is!"

As the New Testament People of God we today echo Israel's response: "The Lord is God; / he made us, his we are; / his people, the flock he tends." (v. 3) There can be no doubt, God's question: "Will you?" deserves our firm and faithful "Yes!"

Second Reading (Rm 5:6-11)

The second reading calls us to a probing self-analysis, in the glaring light of God's presence: Who are we? I would venture to say that, as I read and reread the passage, I was left with the impression of being reduced to a radical self-poverty, an agonizing sense of human incapacity. Paul's powerful statements do not leave us in doubt. Who are we? Powerless individuals who can make God their boast; godless persons touched by God's love; sinners justified by the blood of God's Suffering Servant; enemies reconciled by Jesus' heroic self-surrender; creatures of wrath saved by a Prodigal Father who loves recklessly.

If, on the one hand, we feel overwhelmed by the sense of our own inadequacy, we ought, on the other hand, to realize we have been, inestimably enriched by God's condescending love.

The passage is a powerful meditation by a genius whose wrestling with words rarely falls short of the depth and range of his rushing thoughts. Stripped to our inner nakedness, we can only ask: Who are we? And if Paul's answer is not acceptable, no answer is possible.

Third Reading (Mt 9:36 - 10:8)

The third reading sets in bold relief the compassion, the effectiveness, and the wisdom of Jesus. His heart reaches out in agonizing compassion to the crowds, bewildered, listless, drifting for lack of morale and leadership. His effectiveness devises an inner circle of disciples who will carry on the messianic activity. His wisdom forges a missionary strategy: an explosive outcry — "The reign of God is at hand!" and an all-encompassing norm: "The gift you have received, give as a gift!"

This Gospel passage clearly identifies the basic legacy of Jesus; continuing mission to the future community. A commissioned leadership there must be, but not at the cost of denying that the entire believing community is on mission. The followers of Jesus are not a people **with** a mission. It is truer to say they are a people in state of mission. Mission is our task and touchstone.

For this reason, therefore, we welcome today among the other two consultative bodies of the diocese — the Priests' Council and the Sisters' Council — the Diocesan Pastoral Council. Together with the Interdepartmental Staff, which is the administrative arm of the Bishop, and the Regional Coordinators, who serve as the special representatives and executives of the bishop in the various regions, the three consultative bodies offer the complementary wisdom, the critical faculty and the positive support so essential to the fulfillment of the mission of the local Church in the post-Vatican II era. To each and to all of these groups I offer my sincerest thanks for their loyalty and devotion. Without these valiant people who give untold hours to the upholding of our Church, we would be drastically impoverished. Indeed, the mission of Jesus in our twelve-county area would be seriously compromised.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My Litany of thanksgiving today is endless.

I would be remiss if at this time I did not

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