


PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

Letters From a Bishop - Beggar

PART I

My dear People,



Years ago when I started the long pilgrimage from zealous aspirant for the priesthood to the hopeful day of my ordination and public acceptance as a man approved, there were many moments of personal anxiety. I needed along the way, like all men, much affirmation. I had to be assured that my vocation was not a wild dream spawned in fantasy but a blessing that could some day become a personal gift. A great moment of affirmation came to me when a gracious Providence brought me into the presence of a wonderful teacher, Father Benedict Ehmann. I don't know what he saw in me — but, somehow, believe it or not, I translated his selection into a first sign of personal recognition when he asked me to take part in a pre-Christmas pageant at Immaculate Conception Auditorium in Rochester — cast in the roles of beggar and leper.

I have never pursued his reason for the appointment. I was an anemic lad from Lima and perhaps my trim and lean figure convinced him that his was a wise selection.

But, here I am — years later and pounds heavier — cast again in the role of beggar. What I have to say to you in the next four weeks, is a beggar's cry for help to support the Church of Rochester as we strive to be a living witness to Christ's presence among us.

I have decided to write these next few weekly columns in letter form because I feel that this is more personal and because I have some important personal concerns to discuss with you. Please know that by writing in this way, I am trying to be present to each one of you. I feel a strong bond with all of my

people and, despite the bigness of the diocese and the seeming formality of the newspaper, I have you all in my heart.

I also write you in letter form because it has been a long-standing custom in the Church for bishops to write to their flock about matters of great importance. While my epistle does not pretend to compare with Paul's letters or the great letters of the Church Fathers, the concerns I wish to share are such that this special form seems appropriate in this moment of our history.

For some time now, I have been meditating on a passage of Holy Scripture that has spoken to me with the usual power of God's Word. It comes from the book of Ezekiel. At the beginning of the 33rd chapter God says this to the prophet: "When I bring the sword against a country and the people of this country select one of their number to be their watchman, and the watchman, seeing the sword coming against the country, blows the trumpet to warn the people, anyone hearing but not heeding the warning of the trumpet . . . shall be responsible for his own death. But if the watchman sees the sword coming and fails to blow the warning trumpet, . . . I will hold the watchman responsible." These are awesome words for a human being like myself who has been appointed as a watchman over the flock of Rochester. And yet that is the task that I have accepted within the Christian community. I am accountable to you, and to my God, for this diocese. While I share my role with others, ultimately I am the one who must sound the trumpet. If there are none who listen, then that is on their consciences. But if I do not speak, I am held responsible.

I take this responsibility seriously because the Church has always taken this responsibility seriously. The Church has always believed itself to be the abiding presence of Christ in the world. Just as Christ went about teaching all persons, having compassion on all, and praying for and with all, so the Church continues this mission of teaching, compassion and prayer through the structures of education, human development and

liturgy. Men and women of faith do this in order that all may see that God does truly love us in Christ.


There are many dimensions, however, of Church. First, the Church is not just a present reality. We are an historical Church, one that has a long tradition in the past and one that must constantly be concerned about the future, as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of the Lord. Second, there are two levels of Church within the diocese: the local Church must care about and plan for the needs of the parish; but the Church of Rochester, the diocesan-wide Church must also be prepared to provide services both now and in the future to the total diocesan community.

It is precisely because the Church is all of these things — past, present and future; local and diocesan — that it is necessary for me to sound a warning. For the past ten years, we have all been very concerned about the present Church. The changes in the liturgy, the reorganization of our parish government to include lay leadership and the adjustments to new theological models have all consumed huge amounts of our physical and psychological energy. This has demanded a kind of day-to-day existence, a hand-to-mouth life. While this has certainly been necessary and worthwhile in the period of reform, a constant attention to present realities will reap a poor harvest and leave the next generation of Catholics in this diocese very impoverished.

Thus, the message that I must trumpet as your watchman: the time has come for us to begin to undertake certain projects that will provide good health for the people of this diocese in the years to come. At the same time, we must also place these projects on a solid financial basis. To shrink from this difficult task would be nothing less than irresponsible.

I wish, therefore, in the weeks ahead, to outline to you our plans for new projects and our intended approach to secure the funds necessary to put them into operation.

Pope's Message on Mission Sunday



To you, Missionaries, we will address this year our message for Mission Sunday, certain as we are that, in doing so, we shall be speaking on behalf of all Catholics, and most certain that you will listen to us willingly, beloved sons and daughters who are scattered throughout the world because of your vocation, because of your "mission" to proclaim to the world the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

1. We would like first of all to remind you that this is the Holy Year, the Jubilee Year, the year of penance, conversion, pardon, purification, return to God, Christian conscience, firm resolutions, and interior peace. To sum up the meaning and aim of this special and holy year, we have given it a simple and comprehensive motto, calling it the year of Renewal and Reconciliation: a Renewal that is religious, spiritual, moral, intellectual; and Reconciliation with God, with Christ, with the Church, and, as far as possible, with all men, that is to say, with our neighbour, with those who are hostile or unfriendly, with enemies of whatever kind — a difficult thing indeed but asked of us by the Lord (cf. Mt. 5, 44; 6, 12; 18, 35; Rom. 12, 14; 1 Cor. 4, 12; Acts 7, 60; etc.). We wish that all of you, Missionaries, far from us in space but so close to our heart, may be spiritually associated with this event of vigorous religious awakening, in faith and in grace. We think of you as present here with us.

2. In fact, it is with great pleasure and emotion that, among the pilgrims who have come to Rome for the Holy Year Jubilee, we have seen such large groups of faithful from your missions. How much joy, how much hope these new Christians have brought us, living witnesses as they are to your missionary zeal! We have praised the Lord for extending His reign to your lands, and we praise you and thank you too, good Missionaries, for these fruits of your apostolate. May God console you, strengthen and bless you!

3. Our mind has thus been turned once more to your activities, and to the often new and difficult missionary situations in which you find yourselves. At one time the great difficulty in the way of missionary

work was that of penetrating among peoples that were mistrustful or hostile and into lands that were closed and dangerous to the bold but inexperienced steps of the missionaries.

Today there is another difficulty, and perhaps a harder one, namely that of staying in regions which have become conscious of their own culture and traditions and which no longer appreciate the presence and activity of foreign missionaries, who are often suspected of colonialism, of exploitation and of bringing in a domineering civilization from outside. In many countries there has grown up a national consciousness which does not take kindly to missionaries, as it considers them incompatible with the traditional customs, religion and "authenticity" of the local people. From this comes the great objection: the missionary is not needed, he is no longer necessary.

This obstacle takes insidious and radical forms that are painful to the missionary, forms based on prejudice and dogmatic attitudes and often couched in pagan and heretical language that is hostile and ungracious. The Gospel is none of our business, they will say in certain regions; it is unnecessary; it is not in our tradition or for our race; the days of the missions are over.

The missionary grieves at this — not so much at the rejection of himself as at the rejection of Christ. He begins to doubt the value of the sacrifice that he has made of himself and his life, of family, love, profession, health, fatherland. It all seems useless and in vain, despised and rejected. His mission is contested in its basic principles, its "raison d'être", its fundamental necessity as the joyful and indispensable preaching of the Good News.

4. On this Mission Sunday, as it comes round again, we would like, with the same conviction that you, Missionaries, already carry in your hearts, to confirm you in the certitude of your vocation: the Mission, that is the announcement of the Gospel to all peoples, is not outdated, it is not optional; it is based on the divine plan, on the theology of salvation, on the constant teaching of the Church and the recent solemn decrees of the Second Vatican Council. Dear and venerated heralds of the Gospel to peoples not yet joined to the Mystical Body of Christ, which is the Church, be assured that your choice has not been mistaken, your efforts not in vain; your sacrifice,

whatever its immediate result may be, has not failed.

5. We wish to assure you too, sons and daughters who are all so dear to us in Christ, that you are not alone. The Church is with you. We hope that the whole Catholic Church, hearing these words of ours, will support them wholeheartedly. We are sure that our voice will awaken in every faithful heart support for our beloved missions.

We turn, therefore, now to our priests, especially parish priests with the care of souls, and to all the faithful, especially those who best understand the mystery of God's Church, those who pray, those who suffer, those who are innocent, and we ask them for their solidarity with the missionary cause. We ask them to understand you, to support you, to be united with you, brothers and sisters, who, to bring to faraway peoples the name and salvation of Christ, have made yourselves, on behalf of the whole ecclesial community, the vehicles of missionary activity, an activity that is free and generous, often unknown and heroic, and which costs you a total sacrifice of yourselves.

6. To the Bishops, our brothers in the pastoral office, we turn in a special way to plead, humbly but with authority, on behalf of your cause, dear Missionaries, so that, through their valuable prayers, their sense of worldwide responsibility, their charisms of doctrine and charity, and their generous financial and material aid, they may come more and more to your help. They know and understand the present situation of the missions. It is a grave and important time. This may be said of every period in the history of the Church and of civilization, but today we have a singular and perhaps decisive moment in the life and expansion of our missions. New and, in some cases, insuperable obstacles may have risen up against them, but at the same time new doors have been opened wide for a missionary presence in teaching and social work, which is already a witness to the Gospel and tomorrow may bear fruit in religious ministry.

Our exhortation, is directed too, with paternal insistence, to the superiors of religious congregations, so that they may maintain and intensify their interest in the missions, trying to send to you, Missionaries who are already in the front line of evangelization, what they have of most value, namely new vocations, new brothers and sisters who will come to your aid and extend the effectiveness of your work.