

'It's Been A Very Good Year'

Planned as a first birthday celebration, the diocesan Mass for the divorced and separated also marked the coming of age for a ministry that two years ago was unknown and unavailable in most of the diocese.

"Just one year ago," Bishop Joseph L. Hogan noted in his homily at the Mass, "there were only two groups" for the divorced and separated in the diocese; "thank God we now have 14 groups throughout every region in the diocese."

More than 400 persons, Divorced Catholic Group (DCG) members, non-members and their families, attended the Mass, the first diocesan celebration for the divorced and separated, at St. Mary's, Canandaigua, Oct. 9.

The Mass was the result of a request by several DCG members. They asked Sister Kathleen Kircher, diocesan coordinator of ministry to the divorced and separated, if Bishop Hogan would celebrate Mass with them. He agreed, and with the date set, DCG members began last June to prepare. Sister Kathleen said that she was continually amazed by the attention to detail and the effort the DCG members, representing every diocesan group, put into the event. She also noted that many of those working on the preparations had stopped attending Mass before joining a DCG. For them the effort was a "re-investment into the community," she said.

In his homily, Bishop Hogan noted the efforts of the Church to reach out to the divorced, pointing out the changes that have taken place in the operations of the diocesan marriage tribunal as an important example. He referred to the DCGs as "a great renewal group in our Church," noting that "your presence among us is a call to awareness of each of us to our need for reconciliation."

One statement by Bishop Hogan was

especially meaningful to many attending, Sister Kathleen reported. During his homily Bishop Hogan said:

"I just hope that my presence here today tells you that I love you with a father's love. You are precious members of the family that is the Church of Rochester. You are flesh of our flesh, blood of our blood and bone of our bone. I have compassion for your sufferings of separation from your spouses. I regret deeply your feelings of alienation from the rest of the Mystical Body. I regret deeply any word or deed of mine at any moment of my life which may have contributed to that sense of separation. I beg your forgiveness."

The interest of divorced and separated persons in the services available through the Divorced Catholics Group has been illustrated by their rapid growth. In July 1976, when Sister Kathleen became the diocesan coordinator, two groups were operating; during the next year, new groups formed at the rate of one a month. Indications for the future are that more groups will be added.

The strongest impetus to the ministry's growth has been the members themselves. Organizational meetings typically attract 50 persons, and groups usually double in size in three months. The need is illustrated by the distance some travel; two persons from Mansfield, Pa., attended the organizational meeting in Corning, and the Avon group has regular members who live in Batavia. Diocesan events for the divorced and separated, such as the Mass, also have been attended by a group from Binghamton.

Essential to the continued strength of the groups, Sister Kathleen believes, is that they are member organized and led. Chaplains, most often a sister-priest team, advise the DCGs, and experience has shown that their role is important, sister noted, but members make the decisions

concerning the group, and do the work involved in its operation

The groups also have been effective in dispelling misinformation concerning the status of the divorced, separated or remarried person in the Church. A common misunderstanding which surfaced is that divorced persons are denied the sacraments, even though they are not remarried. Information concerning annulments also has been made more available through the groups

The groups also deal with issues affecting divorced and separated persons, such as family court, special tax situations, adjusting to a new lifestyle, and how to help children through the crisis of divorce.

A major concern of the DCG members that has surfaced is their interest in educating those who are not divorced about their situation. As part of that effort, Sister Kathleen has spoken in many parishes, and DCG members are becoming increasingly involved in efforts aimed at educating the whole Christian community

Nationally, progress also has occurred. Most significant was the removal of the excommunication ban for those "who dare to remarry" without church approval. The ban, which only existed in the United States, was repealed by the nations' bishops at their May meeting.

Paulist Father James Young is the chaplain to the North American Conference of Divorced Catholics, and the founder of the first DCG, in Boston. The contrast in his talks at the conference's annual conventions the past two years illustrates the progress that has occurred both nationally, and, Sister Kathleen commented, in the diocese. Last year, his title was "Hard Challenges Facing Divorced Catholics in the Church."

This year, his title was "It's Been a Very Good Year."



Fred and Bette Brown, the couple on the right, and their children join in during the Our Father. They attended the Mass as representatives of Marriage Encounter.



Sister Diane Branch, St. Joseph's, Penfield composed of members of St. Monica's and groups



The procession opening Mass.



Baskets of grapes and sheaves of wheat