

St. Bernard's to Close

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Photo by Terrance J. Brennan

Bishop Cites Small Enrollment, High Costs

Following is the statement by Bishop Matthew H. Clark announcing the closing of St. Bernard's Seminary.

January 7, 1981

Eighty-eight years ago Bernard McQuaid, the first Bishop of Rochester, in light of the needs of a new diocese, established St. Bernard's Seminary to train our future priests. Over all these years our seminary has met that challenge with distinction in preparing priests to minister here and in many parts of the world.

Today, as I review the current needs of our diocese, I have made a decision to close St. Bernard's Seminary, effective July 1, 1981. This decision, while not an easy one to make, is, I believe, the best decision in the light of all of the circumstances of our times.

The question of whether St. Bernard's could continue to operate and maintain its long tradition of quality theological training has been before us for several years. Bishop Hogan and a special committee reviewed the many facets of this problem nearly three years ago. Since my installation as Bishop, I, too, have been immersed in a continuing discussion of the question. I have dialogued with our priests, as well as with the members of the Board and administration at St. Bernard's Seminary, as the issues involved became more critical. Most recently I asked Bishop Dennis W. Hickey to convene a special committee to review the present situation of St. Bernard's Seminary and to make recommendations to me.

The quality program at St. Bernard's has been maintained in recent years through the devotion and skill of the Seminary Board, the commitment of the current administration and faculty to cut costs, and through the generosity of our people. Yet, all of these combined could not meet the ever growing needs for greater funds.

The following factors are at the heart of my decision:

- the short range prospect of a small and possibly shrinking enrollment.
- a rapid and disproportionate rise in costs, making tuition at St. Bernard's one of the highest seminary tuitions in the country.
- continued maintenance of very large and old buildings.
- our ability to maintain such a quality theological staff.
- the question of responsible stewardship of all our resources in the light of changing times and needs in a diocese of our size.

Put simply — the combination of enrollment projections, inflation, energy costs, make the strain of conducting a theological seminary by a diocese of our size an ever more precarious enterprise.

I wish to reaffirm and stress here that this move in no way is intended to signal a lack of confidence in the potential of our diocese to foster and develop vocations to the priesthood. Earlier this year, I appointed Reverend Thomas Valenti to serve as Vocations Director. It is an important work and depends heavily on the prayers and support of all of us. I am convinced that many of our young people are being called to the priesthood. It is our task to foster and nurture that call. The decision to close St. Bernard's will offer some new challenges and a variety of options for our young men preparing for the priesthood.

Such a decision impacts on many lives and many programs in our diocese.

The Seminarians must now complete their studies in other seminaries. Other programs, such as continuing education, permanent diaconate of the seminary must be adjusted in light of this decision. Finally, there is the question of the future use of the buildings themselves. I am asking the Seminary Board, the Faculty and my staff to work together in the challenging tasks involved in the period of transition.

+ Matthew H. Clark

+ Most Reverend Matthew H. Clark, D.D.
Bishop of Rochester