

Along The Way

With Bishop Matthew H. Clark



Geneva — A few days short of four years ago in a place some 50 miles from here I had one of the great religious experiences of my life.

On that evening as I was installed as your Bishop I experienced our local Church for the first time. From twelve counties came the beautiful people of God — men and women, boys and girls, those committed in the consecrated life, priests and deacons, the married, the single, the widowed.

You came and graced the night and with your strength, optimism and contagious joy gave heart to this pilgrim who at that time really did need the kind of encouragement which only such genuine hospitality can offer.

The memory of that evening still gives me courage when I need it and renewed hope when my spirits begin to flag. Those good things happen not through the easy exercise of remembering a past event but from the gracious gift of God whose Spirit renders timeless the tender care lavished on us in Christ —

The truth is that you evangelized me that evening. I mean that by your presence, goodness and faith you nourished me with the life and strength of Jesus Himself. You put me in touch with Risen Life by extending your lives to me. And I know from the testimony of persons almost too numerous to count that you did the same for others that evening, both those who were present in the War Memorial Auditorium and those who followed the event on television. Perhaps you were there. It may be that you have similar memories of one another.

On this day we gather for similar purposes which perhaps can best be summarized in this way:

1. to celebrate who we are as a people and who we are called to be
2. to motivate and give strength to one another, to be moved by the Holy Spirit of God to deepen and extend our sharing of the Good News
3. to remember and to be revitalized in those great gifts which empower us to proclaim the Good News
4. to be renewed in the awareness of our common mission to live and share the Good News in mission to others.

This is a day of celebration and rejoicing in that life we share in the Risen Lord. His gift, poured out to us from the cross, reconciles us to a loving Father, calls us to His worship and places us in a relationship of brotherly and sisterly service to one another.

This service, however, because it has its roots in the love of Christ and finds its possibility in the power of the Spirit is never well understood if taken only in terms of functions or things done. It is rather a logical and necessary consequence of belonging to one another of being a part of one another.

It is precisely this love-based and cross — won double belonging — to God and to one another — which impels us to proclaim what has happened by our word and in our work; it is what impels us to lavish these gifts upon others as they have been so abundantly given to us.

We celebrate this Christ gift as we have shared it today — through our brothers and sisters in the local Church. They have been mission to and for us as they have expressed gifts of mind and heart in ways which proclaim and invite us to share more deeply the holiness of God Himself.

These gifts have been many and varied. But among them we have known —

- joy bringing relief and hope to those who have forgotten how to laugh,
- commitment — to those convinced that everything is throw away and for-a-time-only in this day and age
- imagination brought to those who conceive of the faith as a note and mechanical observance of an impersonal law
- sensitivity — to persons who have virtually no appreciation of their own worth and who, therefore, have long since given up on themselves.

We have been blessed to see self-giving — a sign of singular power and attractiveness in an age which many describe as self-centered, and long-suffering in a culture whose message so often is: grasp all that brings pleasure and avoid like the plague anything that costs.

In all of these, there is nothing that is magic or arcane. But in them we have seen something of a great mystery — divine love and human freedom coming together in committed care for the divine love and human-freedom coming together in committed care for the other.

I have mentioned sensitivity, joy, self-giving, long-suffering and commitment. I might also have mentioned care, compassion, mercy and sacrifice. They are all God's gifts; they are all present here. We have celebrated them singly throughout the day and now we bring them together in the spirits of those who form this assembly and offer them in Christ to the Father. We shall receive them anew and more deeply in our communion in the Eucharist. In this communion the gifts are deepened. Our mission is made more clear — and so goes on the story of God's unending love for His people.

It is in this moment of communion that we are most one with our God and His people. And so it is in this reality, begun but not yet completed, that we realize so deeply the incompleteness of our labors and the presence in this world of so many others who long to share in what we celebrate.

Let me mention some of them. As I do, find them in your homes, parishes and cities. Find them in your hearts and if I leave some out, please tell me their names — because you know them:

— the elderly who live alone and in a loneliness unbroken by anyone concerned for their well being

— our young — so richly blessed to serve and enliven, so often seaching in futile illusion for the lifetouching values flowing through our tradition.

— our brothers and sisters handicapped in body or mind who want least of all to be dispense from our common life and most of all to offer their great gifts for our enrichment, and to receive the same from us.

— those who were born, baptized and raised among us but who are no longer active with us. What can we say of life to one another?

And what about: — the family — "the domestic Church" where the first lessons of life and love are experienced. We have learned much about their strength and needs. Are we prepared to stand with and support them in the face of so many pressures and counter values which pull them apart?

— Women in the Church — and the long term, patient commitment we need to make so that we as a Church will have the courage to seek and follow the will of God in this regard?

— our Hispanic brothers and sisters? Soon the Church in the United States will be called to a special awareness of this old and rich dimension of our faith heritage. Have we made a sufficient effort to understand and appreciate this reality? And do we truly greet Hispanics as equals in Christ and His Church?

And how we speak to and let speak to us those in particular or especially intense difficulty:

- the divorced and separated
- the widowed
- the bereaved
- victims of perduring racial prejudice
- those suffering unemployment or lack of job security
- those coping with terminal illness
- those addicted to chemical substances
- the imprisoned
- the unmarried carrying babies to term

You can cite many more sources of pain and need, and I am sure you can name from your personal, familial or parochial experience mysterious ways in which the care of Christ has brought healing and new life.

Why do all of these things? to what purpose? Why should we extend ourselves to expand the ways in which we offer this care?

It is the very core of the ministry of Christ and, therefore, of His Church "to bring Good News to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to prisoners, to announce a year of favor to the Lord." (Lk 4,18-49)

And it is the kind of care which must be translated into concrete, practical, life serving action. James asks, "What good is it to profess faith without practicing it? Such faith has no power to save one, has it? (James 1,14-17)

Somehow there is an essential relationship between belief in Jesus and service of His body. It is not enough to say, "Lord! Lord!" and ignore a starving sister. Gifts offered at the altar are an accusation, if I am unreconciled with another person. If I ignore even the least of God's children, I have ignored that Brother in whom all else and all others are to be found.

We know all of these as calls to serve and spend ourselves without limit for the other. But on this day we miss an obvious gift if we do not remember the Risen One reaching out to us in our own need.

"Come and see." "Follow me," he says to us as he once said to the first disciples. Come to know who I am, the care I have for you and the mysteries of life I shall teach you. Let me wash your feet and pour oil on your brow. Let me heal your wounds, give you sight and bring healing to your loved ones.

"Let me offer you cool water to bathe in and let me feed you with food which will never perish."

In the mystery of God's plan for His people faith is the proclamation that Jesus is Lord and it is the gift of life changed by that belief. The Spirit who proclaims in us that Jesus is Lord is the same Spirit who lavishes upon us gifts meant not only for ourselves but for the common good. And it is part of the glory of our faith tradition that we belong not only to God in Christ, but to one another in Christ. We belong to, we are a part of, we need one another. There is no such thing as faith which is alive in the Church but dead in the marketplace.

But like Jeremiah we want to protest, "Don't send me Lord. I am too young. I do not know what to say." Much like the disciple in the gospel story, we consider the meagerness of our resources and ask, "How can the little I have feed so many?" How can we do it? Where shall we get the strength?

It is at this point that we must remember in prayer that we are empowered for our mission by the gift of this loving, leading, teaching Spirit. In the sacraments of initiation the powerful love of that Spirit joins us to the priestly mission of Christ. We become with Him pro-

claimers of the Father's glory, servant of God's people, agents of reconciliation and peace.

In the same Holy Spirit we are given strength by the grace of the vocations to which we are called. These fundamental orientations to God and one another by which we live out our common baptismal vocation describe ways of sanctity. As such they shape us into the image of Christ and give us strength to proclaim the Good News in all that we do.

Surely, we are empowered for this mission by ordination or by the commissioning of the Church to exercise a particular, public ministry in the community.

But it is essential for us all to realize that all of our gifts, great and small, are themselves calls to serve and proclaim. They bespeak empowerment and responsibility. Gifts are calls to us from deep in God's love and the force of the call is doubled when it comes face to face with the needs of others.

The gifts of the spirit aglow in you, God's people proclaiming and serving, is what excites me today.

Today and every day I am privileged to serve you — you are for me a new "Come and see," a fresh "Follow me" from Jesus Himself. For you are joined to Christ in His priestly mission. Your love is His; your service brings the touch of His hand and your compassion opens to me something of His beauty and care.

We need to help one another realize the holiness of this our common vocation, and we need to sustain one another by our prayer, encouragement and faithful witness.

We do this not only when we are willing to make our gifts and spirit available for the service of one another and all of God's people.

We do it when we remind one another that we are never finished, when we give heart to one another in the face of apparent failure and when we help one another draw life from the suffering to which service in Christ's name will inevitably lead us. For when we walk with our friends through such times we open to them the mystery of a new life which translates suffering to joy.

We do it as well in this new age of the Church when we engage in the hard business of the reform of ecclesial and societal structures which are oppressive. It is not easy to look at life and faith with new eyes as we have been asked to do — or to pack up and move along into a future less brightly illumined than we might like it to be. But just as surely as Peter and Andrew, James and John were invited to come and see and to follow Him, so were they told, just as they were beginning to touch the mystery and find comfort that they had to leave the Mount of Transfiguration and walk the road to Jerusalem. And what was there? The Cross. And what was beyond that? New life!

But it is not as though we are moving away from perfection. We know that there is pain and fear and injustice and violence all around us which call out for the healing touch of Christ. The painful cry that we hear, the missioning we have in our baptism and confirmation; the strength for the journey which is ours in the Eucharist, the ancient and ever new call of the Church for a change of heart converge here today in a call of love to which Christ is the only life giving response.

We have been loved much; we must love in return. And so, wonderful people of God, beloved of the Father, I place before you today my hope for us all as we consider the future.

I ask every parish community — with an explicit awareness of belonging to the people of God in the Diocese of Rochester and the Church universal to incorporate into their plans the following basic goals for the next three years.

Year One — Enhance your own role as evangelizers by whole hearted involvement in the prayers and activities of this Holy Year of Redemption.

— pray for the personal and corporate change of heart which will help us to appreciate God's gift to us in Christ and strengthen us to live our part in His saving mission.

— join with our local Church in our consideration of one of the beatitudes each month and the other observances to be suggested each month.

— devote the Season of Advent to a consideration of our call to be peacemakers.

Year Two — Please reach out to inactive Catholics and those in need in our parish communities.

— invite personally to the hospitality of our communities all who are alienated or estranged from our life.

— make every effort to name the needs of our people; identify and help deliver existing resources for them; develop new pastoral responses whenever possible.

— establish among the home bound in every parish an apostolate of prayer for the needs of the parish and the whole Church.

— invite our young people not only to learn about Christ by the study of doctrine but to find Him in the service of those in need.

Year Three — I shall call all parishes to a special year of spiritual deepening and renewed mission and shall ask our Office of Pastoral Services in conjunction with our consultative bodies to develop ways for this to take place.

I hope that our common, ongoing journey as a people will find us more deeply one with Christ, Our Lord. For in Him we find a gentle and compassionate Father, a God of mercy and care whose love for us will never die.

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