

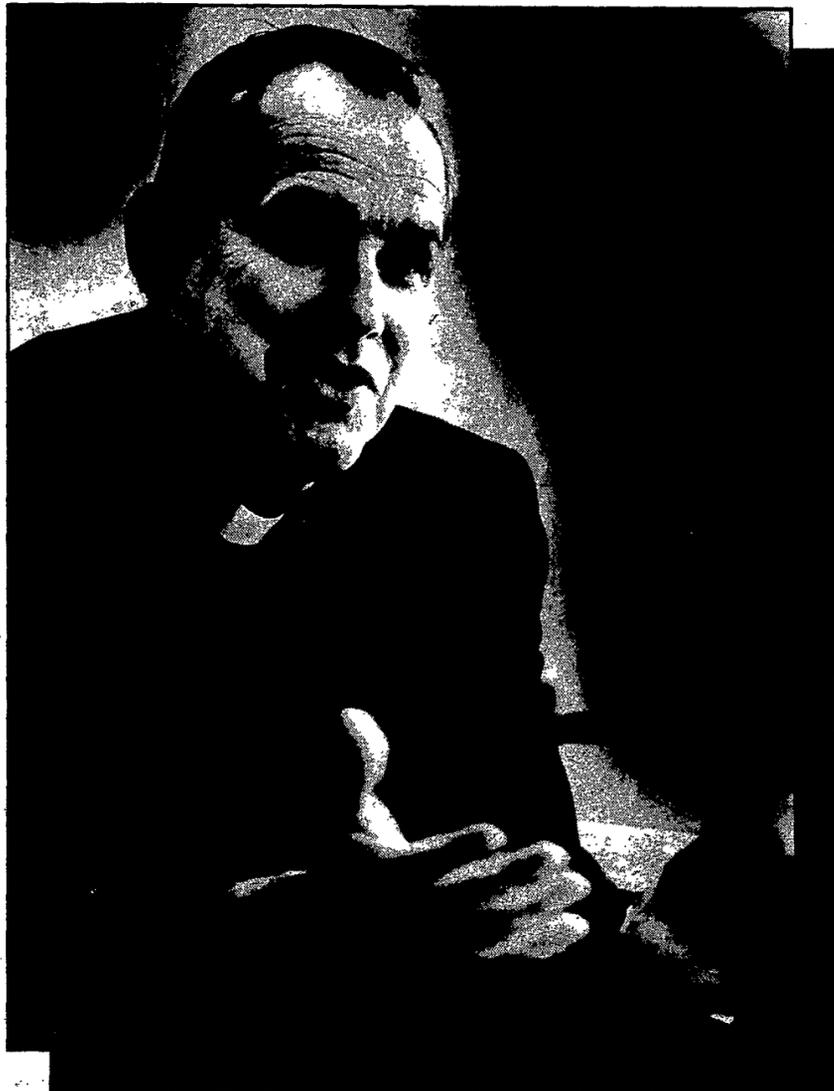
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CATHOLIC COURIER

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Time of tension Bishop returns to face hard choices with hope

By Teresa A. Parsons
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Last month, Bishop Matthew H. Clark returned from a five-month sabbatical to learn of uproar concerning Catholic school reorganization, threats to boycott the Thanks Giving Appeal, and new hopes and tensions born of a March meeting between Vatican officials and Pope John Paul II.

As he approaches his 10th anniversary as Bishop of Rochester this fall, the 52-year-old bishop plans to preside over continuing changes in administration of the Pastoral Center, to bolster priestly morale with individual and regional meetings, and to spend more time among all the people of the diocese — perhaps even participating in a pro-life rally or demonstration.

Shortly after his *ad limina* visit to Rome last October, Bishop Clark left for Cuernavaca, Mexico, where he spent a total of 13 weeks studying Spanish. In between his studies, the bishop visited the diocesan mission team serving in Tabasco, Mexico, spent the Christmas holidays with his family near Albany, and attended a meeting in Orlando, Fla., of the bishops' committee preparing a pastoral on women.

"I missed the people most of all, the beautiful privilege of interacting with this community," he said. "I didn't miss some painful dimensions of problems, the hurts and pains ... Who likes to be associated with those, or even, in some cases, to be

seen to be the cause of them?"

Among the sources of such "hurts and pains" was a plan approved by the diocesan Commission on Reorganization of Catholic Schools recommending the closing during the next two years of six Catholic schools in the northeast quadrant of Monroe County. Two other parishes, St. Anne's and Our Lady of Good Counsel, also announced intentions to close their elementary schools and — in Good Counsel's case — Genesis Regional Junior High School.

Reactions to the closings and consolidation proposals have varied, ranging from hopeful optimism to resignation to outrage. None of the variations surprised Bishop Clark.

"I knew when I left that whenever we started to make the concrete decisions that follow out these years of study that inevitably there would be difficulty. This is simply never going to happen, never has happened anywhere else, without a lot of very difficult times," he said. "The important thing to me is that in the midst of these difficulties we continue to pull together to make this direction work. The alternative to what we're doing is to do nothing, and to do nothing is to create situations much more painful than this is, with the disadvantage that nothing will arise from doing nothing."

Nor have the protests of parishioners or

school parents shaken the bishop's conviction that the direction of school reorganization in the diocese is sound. "I think we are absolutely on the right track in insisting that we need to leave the parish-based responsibility for Catholic schools to a broader based community-wide responsibility for them," he said. "I am also very much convinced of the need to locate our Catholic school efforts in a broader catechetical picture ... Work on Catholic schools is going at a faster pace ... (but) we'll continue to work on the catechetical program in which the schools should be located."

Not long before the bishop left for his sabbatical, he recalled, many school and parish leaders advised him "enough is enough — decisions need to be made." He responded by cautioning them to remember that advice when reorganization assumed concrete form.

"There comes a time in every community when hard choices have to be made and the hope always is that once the choices are made, people will be willing to put aside their objections and to work for the common good," he said.

The bishop is balancing that hope with concern over what to date have been scattered calls for a boycott of the Thanks Giving Appeal as a means of protesting school closings. "Of course I'm concerned," he said of the threat, "but our people have always demonstrated a willingness, with real generosity, to move with decisions once they are made, even when those are decisions they wouldn't have made themselves."

Similarly, the bishop hopes diocesan parishes without schools will voluntarily support the reorganized school system — a hope that has in the past been frustrated locally, despite what Bishop Clark termed "clear" statements from both the Holy See and U.S. bishops that "Catholic education is the responsibility of the whole community."

"I have clear power and authority in this regard," he said, "but we're not a dictatorship ... I may have to expect a certain level of contribution to this effort — I have the ability to mandate that ... but only when we have exercised every reasonable effort to inform and persuade."

"If people don't gather around that (decision) and move with it," he added, "I'm just hollering in the air."

School issues are one among many tensions currently dogging pastors and parish ministers. Many complain that their attempts to implement post-Vatican II changes are being undermined by the church hierarchy's apparent aim to reclaim a greater measure of authority in local matters.

As diocesan leader, Bishop Clark sits squarely at the pressure point of such tensions. "A lot of the pastoral practice that has evolved since the Vatican Council, a lot of forms and ways in which we've shaped pastoral life in this country and in this diocese, now seem to be a little bit threatened by some of the decisions, some of the communications, that have been sent to us from Rome," he agreed. "I know that

I feel that tension, and I know our pastors and other pastoral ministers do, too."

The bishop sustains himself and others with the knowledge that such tensions inevitably accompany times of transition in the life of the church. "That doesn't take away the pain of them, but I try to invite people to try to find any deeper truth that's there for us as we try to work creatively and lovingly to meet the tensions, and in the meantime, that we keep speaking as honestly as we can about what we're learning as we go through that struggle," he said.

In particular, local concerns have lately focused on reports of a "fidelity oath," issued by the Vatican Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, to be administered by local bishops to seminary and pastoral staff members. Uncertainty also surrounds the impending publication of a universal catechism.

Because the fidelity oath has not yet been officially promulgated, Bishop Clark has not decided how it might be used in the Diocese of Rochester. "I do have some concerns about its significance," he said. "I don't know what it adds to our life. I don't know what it's protecting us from. As I understand it, the people to whom I'd



be administering it I know to be loyal, faithful, Catholic people and pastoral ministers, so I need to appreciate much more what this is all about."

Although he acknowledges the value of a universal catechism as "a written expression of our tradition," Bishop Clark questions such a document's practical application. "It's hard for me to conceive that such a document could be, for catechetical purposes, applied in Zaire as it will in Rochester or in the Amazon in Brazil or in Poland or in the Philippines," he said. "Its pastoral use and its catechetical purposes need to be clarified, and I trust that they will be as time goes by."

More meetings like the so-called U.S.-Vatican summit in March can only help to diffuse such tensions, Bishop Clark observed. "The first good thing I see in it is the fact that it was held, and that there was, I would say, a substantial agenda that had to do with the pastoral issues the Catholic Church in the United States faces," he said. "In my living memory, this is the

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