

Parishes enter new phase of planning

To pick up where we left off at the end of 1996, let me wish you and all of your loved ones a very Happy New Year. I hope 1997 will be good for us all, and I am sure it will be if we share with one another the good things that come our way and help one another through all that tests our spirits.

This will be a significant year in the life of our local church. We will be moving further into a strategic-planning process designed to help us deal with a range of pastoral challenges in thoughtful and creative ways. Our major focus will be on our four major Synod priorities: Lifelong Faith Formation; Consistent Life Ethic; Valuing the Dignity of Women in Church and Society; and Small Christian Communities. But we will also do a lot of work in two supporting areas. They are 1) careful collaborative planning at the parish and regional levels, and 2) critical study of how best the relationship between diocesan ministries and services and parish communities can be made more mutually beneficial.

Foundational to this significant piece of planning work — and giving it spirit and direction — will be our continuing reflection on our Sunday celebration of the Eucharistic Liturgy and its central place in Catholic life. Ongoing prayer and thought about our central act of worship will, among other things, remind us of our deepest purposes and values. That helps us to maintain the important awareness that, while numbers and statistics are important in any planning process, there are other extremely important considerations we must keep before us.

The strategic planning process I have just mentioned will require a good deal of work from our parish pastoral ministers and from

along
the way



BY BISHOP MATTHEW H. CLARK

members of parish pastoral councils whom we will be asking to lead the effort. I do not lightly ask for such serious commitments, but judge it necessary to do so if we are to meet adequately the many challenges we now face. It makes the request easier to know that an extensive consultation yielded the strongly held view that we pursue just such a course.

Having said that, I hope that when we have the strategic planning process well underway we can all enjoy a brief respite from the intense work in which we have been engaged since the beginnings of our Synod. These have been wonderful and exciting years in which you have labored very hard to move us forward in honest and helpful ways. But we all need times when we can rest and celebrate the good things we have done before we rush into new projects.

It is difficult to know the future, but I hope it is one that will allow us some time for that kind of collective peace and regrouping. I readily accept the fact that — for reasons beyond our control — we live in an age of continuous change. This will require our careful attention. Otherwise, we will only suffer change, not manage it. But that careful at-

tention is not the same as constant activity. Nonstop activity tends to sap our collective energy, and that is not good for individuals or a community.

Even in the midst of the agenda mentioned above I hope it will be a continuing trait in our local church that, as we work together, we can enjoy one another's company, laugh together and learn more about the presence and love of Christ in our lives.

I'll come back to that theme — how we enjoy and grow through the work we do together in another column. In the meantime, I would really be curious to hear from you about how you keep a good spirit, find laughter and learn about the love of the Lord even in the midst of work and/or problems that can weary your spirit. If I receive some responses from you I will be happy to share them with you in a later column.

Before I conclude, an update: By the time you read this Garon, Kathleen's Internet friend, will have returned to his base in Texas. I was in Waterford when he arrived and enjoyed very much all of the excitement of his arrival. On Friday night he came to the Early home and joined us in a celebration of Jane's birthday. On Saturday Grace hosted a holiday brunch for all of us. Those two meetings left me with the impression that Garon is a fine young man.

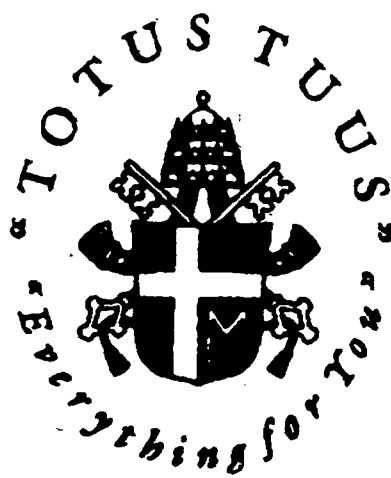
That's about as far as I can take it just now. But I would say that the hope I expressed in my last column was realized in the event, i.e., that whatever the future may hold, their first meeting after a lengthy correspondence will be one that they will long remember.

Peace to all.

In Honor of the Holy Father's

50th

ANNIVERSARY OF ORDINATION



Collection
weekend

January 11-12, 1997



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