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File photo
Bishop Clark looks out over the city of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives during an Interfaith Leadership Mission to Israel from July 30 to Aug. 11, 1998.



Greg Francie/Staff photographer
Bishop Clark shares a smile in his Pastoral Center office June 11.



File photo
Bishop Clark embraces an attendee of the diocese's first Mass for gays, lesbians, and their families and friends March 1, 1997, at Sacred Heart Cathedral.

reflection on that within our bishops' conference.

A couple of years ago there was a brief but very significant pastoral document we published called "Always Our Children" (1997). That wasn't the first statement ever that related to what we call gay and lesbian themes, but it was one that had a particular pastoral purpose and recognized the struggles I just referred to.

Though folks here sometimes think otherwise, we're not creating these issues out of whole cloth here in our local diocese, but rather are part of a large fabric of pastoral reflection to which we try to give appropriate expression here in our local church.

Strong: In 1986, the Vatican ruled that Father Charles Curran (a Rochester diocesan priest teaching at Catholic University) could no longer teach Catholic theology because of some of his views. You expressed support for Father Curran as a person, though not of his views.

Bishop Clark: I argued on the side of wide latitude, not just for Charlie, but for all theologians because I think historically ... it's one of the prime ways that the church has come to deeper insights about long standing issues and has been able to break new ground and (to grapple) with new issues. My opinion is the freer and more peaceful our theologians are in their research, and the raising of hypotheses and possibilities and new ideas, the better off we are, the richer our life is.

But having said that, understandably the church needs to be able to set certain wide limits beyond which we can't go and still hang together as a coherent, progressive community. It was the judgment of the Vatican authorities that Charlie had done that.

I had offered a certain point of view prior to that decision, which I offered honestly and genuinely. It was a time when the decision didn't go the way I might have chosen or hoped for. But I have certain responsibilities about that too, which Father Curran understood perfectly well and with which he was peaceful.

Strong: At the time, you gave your assent to the Vatican ruling, just as you later gave assent to the statement that the rule against the ordination of women is infallible (1995). You make it clear you accept Rome's teaching authority.

Bishop Clark: Those are not just words. I genuinely mean that. Whenever we're talking of matters of faith, we never come to a total understanding of any aspect of it.

Our knowledge is always insipient, it's always partial. And the assent to matters of faith because the church raises them up as worthy of that assent doesn't mean I totally understand everything — or that I don't have areas of doubt or inquiry, or whatever — and I don't think the church requires that of us. Bernard McQuaid, our first bishop, prior to Vatican I clearly did not think it was appropriate to treat infallibility as finally it was treated by Vatican I. But when he came home he got in the high pulpit at St. Patrick's Cathedral and said, I accept this teaching wholeheartedly. And everybody knew that that really was an act of faith. That it wasn't because necessarily overnight he was totally and intellectually persuaded that this was the way to go. But he came to the point where he said, I am a son of the church, I live in the faith of the church and if this is what the church says is our faith, I accept it.

We really need to have a church where people can express their ideas, but we also need to have a church that gathers together when issues are dealt with and decisions are made, even though we know historically decisions get reconsidered. But we need to have that inner cohesion of life that allows us to keep our critical relationships alive and healthy.

Strong: One more painful issue: Corpus Christi Parish (from which Bishop Clark removed Father James Callan in 1998 for violating church rules). How difficult was it for you to finally say, "You have crossed the lines?"

Bishop Clark: Very difficult. I had hope that that might have been resolved through quiet means, quiet fashion, but it became apparent that this wasn't going to happen.

I knew we had to do it. So in that sense you can be reasonably peaceful if you believe something is right, then you can be peaceful in doing it. Which not to say that I am not deeply affected by the pain of people who have been part of this. It has been painful for me in that sense.

It's been by far the most painful experience in my life as a bishop. Why? Because however temporary it might be — and I pray every day that it will be temporary — there's a wound in the body right now. Our community at large is wounded. Lots of people are wounded. I pray for healing of those wounds, and for our ultimate reconciliation.

I think it's going to be slow. It will take a while. But my hope is and my confidence is that it will be progressive. I continue to try to invite those who have moved away from the Roman Catholic tradition to be very thoughtful about what they are doing, to really think through the implications of their decisions to join a schismatic community, to think of what that means in the long run.

What happens when there is a change in leadership? What are the connections to the Roman Catholic tradition? How do they explain to the children what this is all about? Who will confirm them?

There's a huge set of implications to such a decision that I think have not been have not thoughtfully considered.

Strong: looking back at your 20 years as bishop, is there anything you would have done differently?

Bishop Clark: Just in some general ways, I have found that the more you do communicate — and by that I mean establish relationships through which you have honest, beneficial two-way conversations with people about significant matters — the better off you are.

I think we try to have an open shop, so to speak, where people know what's going on and where they are convinced if we ask for some planning it's not to cover a plan that we already have and are now going to lay on them but we genuinely need their input in order to go in the best possible direction.

I think another practical bit of learning is how good things are when everybody can offer their competencies, their abilities, the experience they've garnered over a life time, and have the opportunity to offer that in service to the community. I think that's just a beautiful inspiration of the Vatican Council and 20 years of experience as a bishop has convinced me even more deeply that that was right on. It's such a beautiful thing to see people come alive when they have a sense they are contributing to something larger than themselves.

Strong: Is that the area that you're proudest of, that you've opened things up, such as with the Synod (1993)?

Bishop Clark: I think the Synod as I look at it now was probably the one single event that carries with it some of these values and our efforts to concretize those values in an experiential way. I think it was an opportunity for people to say what was on their minds and to offer themselves to advance their ideas in very practical ways. It was an extraordinary experience ... a very rich experience which was a long time in the developing. The seeds for that event were planted long before I came along, and we will be enjoying the fruits of (it) for many years to come.

I would consider that sort of the centerpiece, if you will, of these 20 years, at least as I see it.

But inevitably I think also of the evening I was installed bishop, June 26, 1979. I walked into the War Memorial a stranger having had very little to do with the development of that liturgical celebration, and found in the liturgy powerful evidence of the strength of this local church and a rich symbol of the work that this local church had done under Bishops Sheen and Hogan to that point. ... To me that's always been testimony to the vitality of the church I entered that night. It was absolutely magnificent.

Strong: What do you hope for the years ahead?

Bishop Clark: I'm very pleased with a growing awareness in our local church and some beginning movement toward working to restore, to deepen a sense of the common good across the bounds of our communities.

I think we are beginning to recover ... that in a continuing dialogue with the culture we can be an important agent unifying the people, healing rifts, decreasing isolation, working together to help everybody live fuller human lives. I'd like to be part of that as I observe it happening here.

I would like to continue working on the nature of the church's ministry, how we break open and make available to our sister and brother Roman Catholics the treasure of grace that the church holds in terms of its sacramental life, its teachings, its service, its celebrations.

But also to hold that treasure up for anyone whom it might attract, the unchurched, the alienated, the dispossessed. I think we need to work for justice in terms of economic opportunity, educational opportunity, health care opportunity, all of those real daily issues. But I think we should never forget the innate dignity of people and their thirst for what is beautiful and rewarding to the spirit.