

# Reflections on 25 years as bishop

Jubilee in our tradition is a time for thanksgiving for blessings received from a gracious God. Jubilee is a time for renewed hope and fresh vision. It is also a time for healing, for strengthening, for new beginnings.

I am deeply mindful of these jubilee themes as I remember May 27, 1979, and my ordination as the eighth Bishop of Rochester, through the imposition of hands and invocation of the Holy Spirit by His Holiness, Pope John Paul II.

That day of ordination provides a graced memory in and of itself. On that magnificent May evening, John Paul II ordained 26 candidates who came from 11 nations on five continents.

In and through that beautiful rite, we became members of the College of Bishops, sharing with the Holy Father, our head, pastoral concern for the whole church; we also were ordained for the service of our respective local churches.

I remember the evening for several reasons. The great diversity of the assembly seemed a microcosm of the church universal. Present were family and friends from the church of Albany, in which I was initiated into the faith, and for whose service I was ordained a priest.

Also present were old and soon-to-be new friends from this beloved diocese. They included the now deceased Bishops Joseph Hogan, John McCafferty and Dennis Hickey; and representatives of the lay faithful, priests and religious of our 12 counties. I will always remember their company at that time as being a foretaste of the warm hospitality and encouraging support I was to enjoy



**Bishop Matthew H. Clark**

## Along the Way

from the people of our diocese when I arrived in Rochester a month later.

A special moment of the evening was the opportunity many of us had to meet Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who attended the ordination. Who could easily forget being introduced to Mother Teresa by Pope John Paul II?

If the evening holds rich memories in and of itself, it also keeps a deep place in my heart as the beginning of an exciting, wondrous, life-giving adventure that continues to this day.

It would be impossible to explain what the privilege of serving as your bishop has meant to me. I have had a sense of God's faithful love and infinite patience all through my life — even when I stumbled or sinned or lost the way.

That realization that God is always with us has only deepened in the years I have spent with you. I suppose that is so because of the privileged range and depth of relationships, responsibilities and experiences God has opened for me by virtue of my episcopal ordination.

You have been good to me from the very beginning. You welcomed me — a stranger in your midst — with great warmth on June 26, 1979, when I was formally installed as your bishop. You taught me the history and traditions of our diocese. You told me the stories. You helped me understand the more recent history of our diocese's response to the exciting, challenging call of Vatican Council II. You spoke with pride and gratitude of the visionary postconciliar leadership of Archbishop Fulton Sheen and Bishop Joseph Hogan. But you were wise enough not to ask me to be just like them. You were kind enough to encourage me just to be myself. You were trusting enough to prod me when you thought I moved too slowly; to offer corrective guidance when you judged I was off the mark.

As I look back and track through the years, I realize that the yearning expressed by the council that the lay faithful become full, active participants in the life of the church is ever

more fully being realized in you.

That is certainly true in the area of lay ministry. I am amazed at the faith, generosity and talent of those who step forward for the pastoral service of the church. These women and men lead our parishes. They teach our children and help adults come to a deeper understanding of the faith. They walk with those God calls to the faith and to ongoing conversion. They support our precious teens through some critical years. They visit the sick, comfort the mourning, and help us to worship with spirit, full heart and voice. They manage finances. They offer all manner of service that, taken in sum, shows the beauty of Christ's face to those who yearn for deeper life.

And what of our permanent deacons? Bishop Hogan planted the seed when he decided with great foresight that our diocese would be enriched by the restored diaconate. We have ordained more than 100 permanent deacons since our first group in 1983. These men, in company with their spouses, have made an immense contribution to our local church. Their special concern for the poor, the prisoner, the alien, the one left behind or otherwise forgotten has shown us the face of Christ the Servant. They remind us daily of our call to imitate Christ, who teaches us and shows us by his example what greatness really means.

I am deeply grateful for the sacrifice they make to engage in their ministry. It is not easy for anyone to manage full-time employment, and marital and family responsibilities. Add a generous measure of pastoral service, and the challenge is the more difficult. Yet they do it successfully and in good spirit.

I am grateful, too, for the way our faith community has welcomed and supported our deacons. Twenty-one years is a relatively short time in which to receive and integrate a new group of pastoral ministers into the ebb and flow of community life. That it has happened so fruitfully here is a tribute both to our deacons and to the faithful of our diocese.

Women and men religious have borne witness to the Good News in this region since before our diocese was established in 1868. Their contributions to our past and our present are beyond measure. For who could tally the number of children they have taught, the number of patients they have cared for? Who could ever quantify their concern for the poor and vulnerable of all ages and conditions? How will we ever know the fruits of their daily prayer for the well-being of all of us?

I know that I am personally and deeply indebted to our women and men religious — for their humble dependence on God, their simplicity of life, their honesty and their willingness to go the extra mile whenever they can make better the life of a neighbor. I must add a note of thanks for their friendship and support.

Just recently the priests of our diocese gathered for our annual celebration with those celebrating their 25th and 50th anniversaries of ordination. I always find the event a moving one, never more than this year in which I am a jubilarian with them.

The occasion raised to higher profile than ever the affection and deep respect I have for the members of our presbyterate. They are a generous, dedicated band of holy men who give their lives in the service of the communities entrusted to their care.

They come in all shapes and sizes. They have different sets of gifts and talents, preferences and aversions, strong and weak points. One thing they hold in common — the element that draws them to unity — is their love for the Lord, the priesthood and you, the people among whom they are privileged to serve.

For reasons well-known to you, these days have been tough on priests. Our presbyterate has not been immune from the pain caused by the scandal of the sexual abuse of young people by some of our number, and by the way the bishops have responded to the problem. Yet our priests, notwithstanding the pain they may carry, continue their ministry with courage and generosity.

To our youngest priests, who are an extraordinary group, to our senior priests, who continue to inspire and serve, and to all in between, I express my thanks and admiration.

The church asks me to be your father and your brother. That's a tall order and I know that I often fall short on both counts.

So my gratitude comes to you not just because of your generous ministry to our people. It comes also because of your ministry to me as you forgive my failures, and offer your friendship and understanding. I ask for your continued support, even as I promise to improve the quality of my own for you.

I thank you for reading these words. Let me conclude with the hope that each one of us according to our vocation, our gifts and our state in life can help our companions on the journey be the salt and light Christ wants us to be.

Thanks for 25 wonderful years.  
Peace to all.

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