

Bishop's kindness, humor recalled

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

EDITOR'S NOTE: In recognition of Bishop Matthew H. Clark's 25th anniversary as Bishop of Rochester, the Catholic Courier solicited anecdotes and observations about him from various Catholics.

After losing her best friend in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on America, a grieving Barbara Smullen found comfort in Bishop Matthew H. Clark's post-Sept. 11 "Along the Way" column in the *Catholic Courier*. She penned a letter to thank him "for such a wise and consoling article," she recalled.

"Within 48 hours, I received a handwritten sympathy note from him," said Smullen, pastoral associate at Holy Name of Jesus Parish in Greece. "I will be forever grateful that he was willing to share my pain and help give me strength when I am only one of such a large flock."

Other members of the bishop's large flock shared several stories of him. Nancy DeRycke, pastoral minister at Church of the Resurrection in Fairport, recalled writing to Bishop Clark years ago to see if the diocese would be willing to hold a wel-

coming ceremony for catechumens and candidates in Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults programs throughout the diocese before their initiation into the Catholic Church.

"I was taken aback when I got a call from him asking if I would organize (the ceremony)," she said. "This regional prayer experiment eventually evolved into our annual RCIA Rite of Election in our diocese." During the rite, the bishop affirms the decision of the unbaptized, or catechumens, and candidates to be initiated into the Catholic Church, and Rites of Election now take place all over the diocese shortly before Easter.

Barbara Pedeville, of the diocese's human resources office, said one of her fondest memories of Bishop Clark stemmed from a diocesan youth convention in 2000 when participants were asked to read aloud letters they had written to future teenagers, before placing the letters in a time capsule to be opened in 2025. Some of the students wrote about Bishop Clark, she said.

"They expressed sentiments like 'I hope you feel as loved by your bishop as we do by ours,' and 'I hope



File photo
Samuel Martin from St. Patrick's Parish in Owego gets his picture taken with Bishop Matthew H. Clark on Sept. 14, 2003.

your bishop is as supportive, kind, compassionate and fun as our bishop was," Pedeville said. "When I looked at (Bishop Clark); there were tears on his face, and I thought then how wonderful that these teens had experienced this kind of love and how much it meant to Matthew to hear those words of encouragement and love returned."

Denise Mack, pastoral associate at Church of the Assumption in Fairport, praised Bishop Clark for his efforts in such areas as women's issues, the 1993 Diocesan Synod and Catholic-Muslim cooperation.

"I only know that this bishop cares so deeply for the church that he wears that care with profound grace," Mack said.

On the lighter side, many Catholics said they particularly remembered the bishop's sense of humor. For example, Lou Litzenberger, the *Courier's* editorial assistant, formerly served on the board of directors of St. Joseph's Villa in Greece, and recalled Bishop Clark steering one member of his flock away from "error" almost 25 years ago.

The bishop, then recently installed as leader of the Diocese of Rochester, met several children after celebrating Mass at the Villa. "He asked one boy what his favorite sport was," Litzenberger said. "The boy answered, 'baseball.' 'And who is your favorite team?' The boy answered, 'The Boston Red Sox,' to which Bishop Clark responded, with a smile, 'That's a terrible way to speak to your bishop!'" The boy was apparently unaware of the fact that Bishop Clark was a fan of the New York Yankees, Boston's nemesis.

Sister of St. Joseph Catherine Gibbons, faith-formation coordinator

for parishes in Clyde, Savannah and Lyons, noted that a young man from St. Michael's, Lyons, is gunning for the bishop's job. Confirmed at Rochester's Sacred Heart Cathedral in 2002, the young man approached Bishop Clark after the ceremony, and told him that he, too, wanted to be bishop of Rochester someday. Sister Gibbons said. "The bishop chuckled and affirmed the youth's plans. He asked the young man how old he was — the response was 12. Again the bishop chuckled and said he thought he'd be ready for retirement before the young man is ready for his job."

The bishop might have relinquished that job long before reaching retirement age in 2012 if he hadn't been assisted by some gracious people in Chile, according to Sister of Mercy Janet Korn, who worked in the capital city of Santiago from 1968-81. During a visit to the Mercy Sisters' missions in Chile in 1979, the bishop got lost jogging and wound up going to a parish for assistance.

"Our bishop was dressed in a pair of running shorts and a T-shirt decorated with a big No. 1," Sister Korn said, noting that Bishop Clark told the parish caretaker, "I am the bishop of Rochester, and I'm lost." The caretaker was about to respond, "Oh sure, I'm the pope," Sister Korn said. Fortunately a parishioner led the bishop to a phone, where he began calling groups of North American religious, hoping to find the Sisters of Mercy. Although the sisters had no phone, the bishop eventually found someone who gave him directions back to their residence.

"Naturally, there was great rejoicing," Sister Korn said. "We knew that the people of Rochester would never forgive us for losing their bishop." She added that several people jogged with him the next day so he wouldn't get lost again.

Some people remarked on the bishop's ability to remember people's names and faces, as well as the parishes with which they are associated. On at least one occasion, however, the bishop's facility with names may have been suspect, according to Donna Gray, youth minister at St. Lawrence Church in Greece. At the May 1 Junior High Youth Rally in Seneca Falls, she said her son, Michael, and a young girl named Rachel were impressed that the bishop addressed them by name when he gave them the Eucharist.

"Both these young people just could not believe that Bishop Clark knew their names," she said. "I didn't have the heart to tell them that they had name tags!"



**Best Wishes
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on your 25th anniversary as
Bishop of Rochester
from your Brother Knights
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