

Bishop takes keen interest in youths

Did he really sleep outside overnight? Did he run the whole 5K race? Was that him in the leather jacket riding into the gym on the motorcycle? Did he really throw out the first pitch? Did you see him playing the bongo drums? Was that a pink flamingo on his head? Did he really sing and preach in front of 25,000 people?

Anyone who has followed the diocesan or national youth gatherings knows that the answer to each of these questions is "yep, that's our bishop!" Over the past dozen years, I have had the privilege and pleasure of witnessing these and many other moments of ministry that have brought Bishop Matthew H. Clark together with our young people.

Perhaps the defining illustration of his deepening relationship with the young church came in 1993 in Denver during World Youth Day attended by nearly 500,000 youth and young adults from all over the world, including 500 from our own diocese. There, amidst the August heat and the crowded venues, I witnessed a transforming moment in the life of his ministry as Bishop Clark attended to his young flock in a most powerful and dramatic fashion by making his presence with the young people a priority over all else.

That probably sounds very non-dramatic, but one must view this from the perspective of what else was going on. Pope John Paul II was in town. Bishops from all over the country and the world had come to Denver to be a part of the weeklong events. Many official gatherings, dinners and socials had been planned for these bishops and dignitaries, some of which included the pope. And while Bishop Clark made his way to the most important of them, he clearly saw the faith journey of the youth as his primary reason for being in Denver that week. So instead of a bishop's dinner, he spent



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

Michael Theisen.

The Forum

the day traveling with a group of Hispanic youth from some of Rochester's urban parishes. A social event with other dignitaries was bypassed in order to spend the day at catechetical sessions with a group of young adults from the diocese. Rather than staying at the downtown, four-star hotel provided for the bishops, he chose to stay with our delegation, crammed into an out-of-the-way motel.

But it was Aug. 14, 1993, that brought the moment that made history. It began with Bishop Clark skipping the air-conditioned bus transportation provided for the bishops and joining the Rochester pilgrims on a two-mile hike (with backpack) into Cherry Creek Park. Here he chose to spend the next 24 hours sitting, visiting and praying with the other 500,000 pilgrims during the evening vigil service. And then, as

the bishops and other dignitaries were getting on their bus for the trip back to their downtown hotel, Bishop Clark was unfolding his sleeping bag, preparing to spend the night outside on the ground with the other World Youth Day pilgrims. I can't say he got a lot of sleep that night, not with all the flashbulbs going off as word spread that "a bishop was sleeping on the ground with us!"

The impact that decision had upon the many young people and adults who witnessed it has reverberated throughout our diocese (and country) ever since. In that moment, Bishop Clark had spoken clearly his commitment, hope and affection for the young church of Rochester. In that moment, the young church saw a man who was willing to go to any lengths to be present with them, to listen to them and to walk with them along their journey of faith.

From the eyes of a young person whose first nature is to suspect adults and mistrust institutions, Bishop Clark's consistent presence with them over the years has been a powerful barrier breaker, resembling the journey Jesus took with his own disciples; walking with them and teaching through both word and deed of the goodness and graciousness of a God whose love endures forever.

Thankfully, Denver was just the beginning of a long list of memorable moments spent with the young people. Since Denver he could be found at just about any diocesan or national youth-ministry gathering, usually in casual dress, sitting and chatting with the young people over a meal, discussing a talk or patiently complying with the numerous requests for pictures, shirt signings or the relaying of many messages from family or friends. Over the past years, countless young people have seen him don another silly hat at a National Catholic Youth Conference,



File photo

In this 2001 photo, Bishop Clark reads to students at Greece's St. Charles Borromeo School.

hand out one of thousands of Hands of Christ plaques, sing a karaoke song at a youth convention or join in a game at the Junior High Rally. And through it all, Bishop Clark has provided our youth with a meaningful model of faith and a hope-filled message that they do not walk the often difficult journey of life and faith alone.

His ministry of presence not only touches the youth but also reaches the adults who have been called to minister to and with them. One of the major reasons that youth ministry is thriving in the Diocese of Rochester is because of the support and attention that Bishop Clark has consistently given it over the years. When we created our Diocesan Youth Scholarship Fund to help teens attend retreats and conferences, Bishop Clark's was the first gift received (and an unsolicited one at that).

Congratulations

Bishop Clark, on your
25th Anniversary with us!



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Dinner / Lecture Series: 6 - 9 p.m. Wednesdays

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- July 21: Dreams: God's Forgotten Language
- July 28: Unsilencing the Voices of Adolescent Girls

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9 a.m. - noon, Mon. - Fri., July 12 - 16.

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