

TWENTY YEARS – THE ANNOUNCEMENT

March 17, 1987, finally came, and the news that I was to become the seventh bishop for the Church of Altoona-Johnstown was made public at 6:00 a.m. EST. That would correspond to 12:00 noon at the Vatican. No longer did I have to carry this secret within me. Following the Saint Patrick's Day early breakfast with my staff, the parish was abuzz with the news.

All that day, I was busy answering phone calls of congratulations and answering questions in interviews by the local news media. It seemed like everyone wanted to know things to which I did not have the answers, not having been a bishop before. There were requests for photos of me dressed as a bishop, which I did not have, since I was to keep the news secret until then. Eventually, I borrowed some things from Bishop Kenneth Untener.

Each day's mail brought greetings. The students of Saint John the Evangelist School in Bellefonte were among the first to send me words of welcome. They had just lost their pastor. I also received letters and phone calls from both clergy and laity of the Altoona-Johnstown Diocese concerning problems that they saw. They wanted me to be prepared. But, I was not yet prepared to deal with such things. I was still grieving over leaving the Saints Peter and Paul Parish family that had accepted me and loved me from the day that I arrived three years earlier.

The expectation was that I would have been present in Hollidaysburg for the announcement, be ordained a bishop in Saginaw (Michigan), and then be installed as the diocesan bishop in Altoona. I decided not to do it that way. There were several reasons. One was my sense that an ordination of a bishop should take place where he is going to be the bishop. Another was that no bishop of this diocese prior to me had ever been ordained here. So, I stayed in Saginaw, leaving Bishop Hogan to make the announcement locally without me.

It was important, however, that I make a visit to the Diocese as soon as possible. This was arranged and took place so that faces could be put on names, I would be informed about the Diocese, and basic plans for the ordination could be made. I was met and welcomed at the Blair County Airport in Martinsburg and escorted to the Bishop's Residence. I remember several diocesan officials being there. They, including Bishop Hogan, were most gracious to me. The only downside was that we had turkey for dinner. (As you may know, I am not fond of fowl.)

Then came the briefings by the various department heads. It had been relatively easy being the Bishop's Secretary and, then, Chancellor of the Diocese in Saginaw. There was a bishop ultimately in charge. But, the buck was now going to stop with me in regard to the matters being presented to this incoming diocesan bishop. My head was spinning a bit from all that was suddenly being "thrown" at me. Nevertheless, a competent staff that appeared to be willing to work with me put me at ease. I had considered myself a good pastor. Being a diocesan bishop calls for the very same skills, but on a much larger scale.

So, this is where the Lord wanted me for the rest of my life, I thought to myself. Was I filled with anxiety? Of course. However, the Lord sent me a very clear message on my trip back to Saginaw. The commuter plane in which I was riding between Martinsburg and Pittsburgh took a sudden nosedive in order to avoid the exhaust trail of a large jet in front of us. I thought that we would be kissing mother earth for sure! But, we did not. Why? Since then, I have wondered a good number of times why various situations have not spelled disaster for this Diocesan Church. The answer is the same in both cases. The Lord is in charge, and not we. What a relief!