

## **CELEBRATIONS**

Celebrations are very much a part of our lives as Christians. We celebrate holy days and the lives of our heroes and heroines, the saints. The Mass is referred to as being “celebrated.” Anniversaries and various accomplishments in one’s life are also celebrated. These celebrations often take the form of a social meal, such as a banquet or a testimonial dinner.

Congratulations are a part of most celebrations. The person of honor is praised for reaching a particular milestone or achieving a certain goal. Most often, these successes are not so much the credit of the individual as they are of the Lord and his favor.

Our Diocesan Church is graciously celebrating this weekend several milestones in my life. I have completed the 75<sup>th</sup> year of my earthly journey. This year marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood. Having reached the distinction of having served this Diocesan Church as its Bishop longer than any of my predecessors, I am well into my 24<sup>th</sup> year. It is also the year when I am expected to “pass the bishop’s staff” on to another Bishop. And, so, we celebrate.

It is the Lord’s loving providence that needs to be acknowledged and celebrated. The fact that I have reached my 75<sup>th</sup> birthday in relatively good health, “survived” 50 years in the priesthood, or have lasted over 23 years as the Bishop of Altoona-Johnstown is not of my doing. It is the Lord’s. And, while I have made mistakes, what has been accomplished for Christ’s Church (despite the mistakes) is of the Lord’s doing, as well.

As I prepare my homily for the liturgical celebration at the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament, I keep going back to something that I said there at the time of my ordination as Bishop over 23 years ago. One’s life appears to be planned, even though one has not planned it! Reflecting on the past 23 years of my overseeing our Diocesan Church, that appears to have proven itself to be true once again.

It is the Lord’s activity among us and through us that we celebrate within the context of the Mass, - in a spirit of gratitude that is the Eucharist. When I consider what could have been and what in other Dioceses in similar situations has come to be, our hearts need to swell with humble pride and overwhelming thanks.

Truly, our Lord is an awesome God. He has done what He has done despite our weaknesses and in spite of our uncooperative spirit at times. The agenda for our Diocesan Church has been (and continues to be) his and not ours.

Two days before I was ordained, I gathered with the clergy of the Diocese to pray. My bishop’s insignia were blessed at that Prayer Service. It was on that evening that I explained how my becoming the Diocesan Bishop did not mean that I had already arrived at the destined shore and was called upon simply to pull the boat toward me. I said that we were all in the same boat together, trying to reach the proper shore together. My role, as Diocesan Bishop, was to see that everyone was rowing in unison so that we would not be going around in circles.

I will be passing on the role of a bishop’s oversight, confident that this “diocesan vessel” is well on its way. That, indeed, is reason to celebrate and praise the Lord.