

Bishop Reflects on His First Year

By Bishop Victor Galeone

While it hasn't been quite one year since Bishop Victor Galeone was ordained the ninth Bishop of Saint Augustine, August 21, he has experienced a great deal this year that would challenge any CEO of a major corporation. In the following interview, Bishop Galeone shares his thoughts with us as he approaches his one-year anniversary.

What have been some of the highlights of your first year as Bishop of Saint Augustine?

Chronologically speaking, the first highlight in my first year as bishop here was 9/11. I will never forget that day. It was three weeks to the day of my ordination and my first diocesan staff meeting. The events of that day embedded themselves in my mind and I will remember them until the day I die. "Where was I on 9/11?"

The second highlight was in October where on three separate Sundays, I dedicated three new worship spaces (churches) in the diocese. Bear in mind that during my entire 66 years of life, I had never witnessed the dedication of a church and here I was dedicating three of them as a bishop!

The third big highlights were the priestly and diaconate ordinations that occurred in May. Especially, the priestly ordinations. There I was, doing exactly as we read in the Book of Acts (Acts 13:3) where the disciples fasted and prayed before they laid hands on Barnabas and Saul. Here I was doing 2000 years later what was done at the beginning. I found that extremely moving.

The fourth and last highlight of my first year was the bishop's meeting, June 13-15 in Dallas. It was there we hammered out a charter that would effectively deal with past, present, and heaven forbid, any future cases of sexual child abuse by our clergy. I believe this charter will be effective and I feel relieved that we can now put this behind us as we look forward to the future.

What aspect of your ministry as bishop have you enjoyed the most?

One of the more enjoyable aspects of my ministry this year was visiting the Catholic schools, especially the elementary schools. The half days that I spent there going from classroom to classroom were a rejuvenating experience for me. To see the innocence on those little faces, the joy, the enthusiasm just made me realize that this is what being a bishop is all about - "reaching out to the least of our members and experiencing firsthand the goodness of the children."

The second aspect I enjoyed a great deal was the confirmations. I must confess that prior to the first confirmation I thought it would be a very tedious process. However, I found meeting the young people - being an instrument of the Holy Spirit that filled their souls - a rewarding and rejuvenating experience for me. I will never get tired of confirming these young Catholics and visiting with their families afterwards.

What were some of the least favorable aspects of your first year?

Even before I was nominated and ordained a bishop, I realized there were two aspects of being a bishop that I would not enjoy. The first was the administrative aspect of my position and the responsibility that comes with it. It is not easy making decisions that will affect a person's life - their entire future. For instance, should I approve a seminarian for advancement to the priesthood when the seminary staff raises a red flag? Ultimately, the buck stops with me and unfortunately there are times when I have to make a decision that is not a favorable one. No one likes to be the bearer of bad news.

Correlated with that is enforcing unpopular decisions, whether those decisions involve directives from

the Holy Father, upholding our church's teaching, or one from myself. There again, no one likes to be unpopular, but if something I feel has to be carried out a certain way then I'm the one that has to enforce it locally.

Coming from the Archdiocese of Baltimore, I know they don't have as many miles to cover as you do here - 11,032 square miles to be exact! What have you learned by traveling the diocese?

This diocese is twice the size of the Archdiocese of Baltimore. There are 4,800 square miles in Baltimore, so distance wise it is a bit daunting. However, I am grateful for tape decks and educational tapes that I play on the way to far away parishes. The size is large not just in area, but for me personally, to be assigned from a parish of 3,800 souls to a diocese of more than 144,000 Catholics was another formidable part of my coming here.

As you visit parishes in the rural areas are there any aspects that particularly stand out in your mind?

Surprisingly, whether we are dealing with an inner-city parish like Crucifixion in Jacksonville or a country parish like St. Francis Xavier in Live Oak - the people have demonstrated simplicity and goodness. They are very uncomplicated and there is a disarming honesty about them. That's refreshing! The least little thing that I have done people has been quick to show their appreciation. Perhaps it is that Southern hospitality that we hear so much about.

You have repeatedly said how grateful you are for what you have inherited from your predecessor Bishop Snyder. Can you elaborate more on that?

The first thing that comes to mind is how he led his people by example. Bishop Snyder is kindness personified. He is a good, good person.

Over the last several months, I have reviewed a number of priest personnel records because of the crisis involving sexual child abuse by clergy. It was clearly evident to me that while we know Bishop Snyder to be kind, he was also firm when he had to call a brother priest to task. This is one reason our diocese has fared so well with regards to effectively handling allegations of child sexual abuse.

St. Paul says that love is patient, love is kind. Kindness is always tempered with truth and that is the case with Bishop Snyder.

Secondly, I am grateful to him for the staff that I found in place here. Every one of them, almost without exception, is competent and dedicated to the Lord and I attribute that to his leadership.

The third thing I would like to highlight is the special outreach programs that I found in place. The first special program is the annual visit to Catholic elementary schools and high schools. I have never heard of a bishop visiting and teaching classes in 50 percent of the elementary schools every other year. As I mentioned earlier, this was one of my highlights this year.

The second special program is the quarterly Businessmen's Communion Breakfast. He started that, as well. We have approximately 70 exceptional professionals from the legal, medical and business fields that come together four times a year for Mass and breakfast. It provides me an opportunity to give a state of the diocese report and to obtain feedback from them. At first I found it somewhat intimidating to think I would be rubbing shoulders with these professionals, but now I look forward to the breakfasts and I am grateful to Bishop Snyder for that.

The third special program is the solid ecumenical relations that Bishop Snyder fostered in this diocese. It was minimal, as I understand, it prior to his coming here in 1979, and I hope to continue fostering positive relationships with other faith leaders.

The fourth point that I am grateful for is the loyalty that I discovered among the priests - the spirit of camaraderie and brotherhood. It's not just on the surface - it is profound and authentic.

And lastly, I am so grateful to Bishop Snyder for initiating the capital campaign in the closing months of his tenure. I personally find it distasteful to ask for money - and I think most people do. However, he saw there were major projects that needed funding and he knew it would take me three to four years before I was in a position to inaugurate such an undertaking. He knew that it had to be done before he left and I am very grateful for that.

What are some of the challenges that you see for the diocese in the next three to five years?

Very specifically, I would like to answer that question by referring to what I said was my objective in my ordination remarks on August 21. Namely, I want to make Jesus better known, loved and served by everyone in our diocese. So the challenge is to make that effectively happen from the pulpit, in our schools and in all the teaching environments.

In addition, all of us, irrespective of our theological persuasion - liberal, moderate, conservative - must be faithful to what the Lord expects of us. According to Scripture, our relationship to the Lord is that of a bride to her bridegroom. In that context one uses the word fidelity just as a husband or wife is called to be faithful to each other.

Jesus said, "I am the way of the truth and the light." He is the truth and all of us - bishops, priests, religious and laity - must focus our eyes on Jesus. The closer we draw to him the closer we come to each other. So the real question in my opinion is, are we being faithful or unfaithful to what Jesus expects of us?

Another challenge facing our diocese is addressing the needs of the burgeoning Hispanic community. This is especially true in the western counties of our diocese. There are three counties in our 17-county area of the diocese that have no Catholic presence. And it is precisely in these areas that we have a growing Hispanic population with migrant workers. How do we reach out to them and minister to their needs? Ninety percent of them are baptized Catholics when they come to us from their native countries of South America, Central America and Mexico. We must not forget them and we need to respond effectively.

On a related subject, we need to establish new parishes. Within the next year I hope to elevate one of our eight missions to parish status.

And finally I would like to help our Catholics develop a better sense of stewardship. Returning to the Lord all that we have been given - time, talent and treasure - should be viewed not as a duty or burden - but as a privilege. It is just one way we can tell the Lord how much we love him. If we could get the majority of our people to dedicate themselves to stewardship, we would have our material needs taken care of for years to come.

Bishop, in reviewing your challenges for the next three to five years - there is a lot that needs to be done. How do you expect to accomplish it all?

Take it one day at a time - one step at a time, one family at a time, one person at a time. I think that is part of my Latin America experience. I went down there with the typical Yankee mentality, "Okay folks, here I am." A Messiah complex - I'm going to do it my way and I found out it is much more effective to meet people where they are and treat them as I myself like to be treated. Not forcing, but gradually convincing them through dialogue and different challenges to get them to at least try this. If it works, fine. If it doesn't, let's chuck it. I found that you have to get them to at least try your idea and when they see that it works; they won't want to go back.