

BISHOP MATTHEW CLARK on THE YEAR OF THE PRIEST GATHERING

Yesterday at the Notre Dame Retreat Center, Canandaigua, the priests of our diocese met under the theme "Come Away With Me." As the theme suggests, we invited our priests to step aside from their normal daily responsibilities to enjoy an opportunity to pray and reflect together on the vocation that we share. While the event was planned before Pope Benedict XVI declared that this is the "Year of the Priest," it fit perfectly into what our Holy Father hopes for the year.

In essence, the day was designed to invite the priests assembled to reflect on their vocation. Some of our number were asked in advance to prepare comments about certain themes. Some examples: Fathers Bob Werth and Mickey McGrath were asked to reflect on the priesthood they had anticipated prior to ordination and how they have actually experienced the life.

Fathers Paul Tomasso and Bill Coffas agreed to speak about a priest whose life and ministry had inspired them in a particular way. Fathers Tom Mull and Felix Dalimpuo responded to the question, "How do you continue to grow in your spiritual life with Christ?" Father Jack Rosse, who has been ordained for 55 years, and Father Edison Tayag, who was ordained in June 2008, responded to this question: "When you remember the day of your ordination and first Mass, what are the feelings, who are the people and events most vividly present to you?"

Interspersed throughout the day were opportunities for priests to speak from the floor -- and from the heart -- about any of the questions that were raised or to make any comment they wanted to make.

We were all pleased that those who planned the day visited and recorded the thoughts of some of our priests who were unable to come to Canandaigua. That kindness allowed us to see and enjoy the reflections of Msgr. Bill Shannon, and Fathers Otto Vogt, Bob Meng and Bill Gordinier. These men are among our senior priests. At the other end of the age and vocation spectrum we heard from seminarians Greg Rupik and Peter Van Lieshout, who recorded their message just before they left home to begin their theological studies in Rome.

My own responsibility was to introduce each of the sections of the day by sharing my thoughts about questions such as the following: What was on your mind and what were you feeling on the night you were installed as Bishop of Rochester? What cares and concerns did you have? What do you remember about what challenged and excited you in the early years of your priesthood? What do you think are the most significant accomplishments of our diocese during your tenure? How do you sustain a relationship with the Lord? What events or experiences have most deeply shaped your person, your priesthood?

I enjoyed the day immensely. All who spoke told a piece of their story that was very important to them. They helped us to understand ourselves better. I found much grace in my own preparation. It put me in touch once again with experiences that in so many ways have brought me to this point in my life's journey. The experience helped me to appreciate the past and to anticipate the future in joyful hope. Please pray for all of us priests this year and be assured of our daily prayers for you.