Instead of writing my usual article for this month’s People of God, I thought I would share with you some rich experiences I have had recently here in the archdiocese and in the Diocese of Las Cruces. These experiences are filled with hope, grace and new life. I am grateful to God for them and I would like to share them with you here.

The first of these events was the funeral Mass for Father Arkad Biczak. You may think this is a strange way to begin, but Father Ark’s funeral at St. John XXIII Catholic Community was truly a resurrection experience. Yes, it was sad. We lost a wonderful priest. But it was filled with a sense of new life, a life made possible by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Father Ark lived a full, priestly life. He was, among other things, a professor of theology, a director of youth activities, a mission office director, and, most importantly of all, a pastor. He embraced the second Vatican Council and lived it to the fullest. As we left the church, I heard many people saying how blessed they felt to have had Father Ark in their lives. I felt the same way.

The second experience was a Presbyteral Council meeting at the Immaculate Heart of Mary Retreat Center in Santa Fe. Again, you may be wondering how a meeting, of all things, could be filled with hope and new life? Well, for me it was so gratifying to be with my brother priests who take such a vital interest in our local Church. The priests discussed a variety of topics including how we can better serve our parishioners who are hospitalized; pastoral planning; providing a safe environment for our youth and young adults; developing a response plan to keep parishioners safe while attending Church; clergy ongoing formation; liturgical guidelines for deacons; and responding with pastoral compassion to those who have lost a loved one. It often occurs to me how truly blessed I am to be part of such a splendid presbyterate. Our priests work very hard and they inspire me by their selflessness and deep desire to serve Christ and His people.

After the council meeting, I packed my suitcase and drove to Our Lady of Guadalupe Benedictine Monastery in Pecos to lead a weekend retreat for many of our permanent deacons and their wives. It was a wonderful, prayerful experience to be with those ordained men and women. In addition to our conferences and prayer times, we enjoyed many pleasant meals together, all the while listening to the voice of the Lord in that beautiful monastery. I am truly impressed with the dedication of our permanent deacons and their wives. In addition to raising families, tending to their secular jobs and fulfilling all the many responsibilities that they have, they find time to answer God’s call to serve the Church so faithfully and well. They are not seeking any fame or riches; only that they will fulfill God’s will in their lives. I am deeply grateful to them for their singular service in our archdiocese.

At the end of the retreat, I drove to the (Albuquerque International) Sunport to greet several mainland China Catholic bishops who were passing through Albuquerque. As you know, the Vatican has established new relationships with the Catholic Church in China. The bishops were very eager to get to know us and they expressed the hope that we might continue to build a strong relationship in the years ahead. I thank God for the promise of this very brief yet significant visit.

I then went up to the Monastery of Christ in the Desert where I had the privilege of ordaining one of the monks to the priest-
hood: Brother Bonaventure, OSB. He is currently serving as the prior there. Many of his Vietnamese relatives made it to the ordination, some coming from as far as Vietnam. Of course, many of our Vietnamese priests were there as well, beaming from ear to ear. It was a most joyous occasion and the relatively new abbot, Christian Leisy, OSB, was elated as were all the other monks. It is a great gift to be part of the ordination of a priest. Please keep Father Bonaventure in your prayers.

After the ordination, I went to Las Cruces for the installation of the new bishop there, Most Reverend Peter Baldacchino. Bishop Baldacchino is originally from Malta and most recently served as auxiliary bishop in Miami, Florida. The Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Christophe Pierre, was present along with Archbishop Thomas Wenski of Miami and many other bishops, priests, deacons, religious, and laity. It was a very joyous occasion as the people of the diocese welcomed their third bishop. I am looking forward to getting to know my brother bishop who is the newest member of the Province of Santa Fe. He is filled with life, energy and a marvelous sense of humor. God has given us a wonderful gift in this talented bishop.

I am pleased to share these moments of faith and new life with you as signs of the vitality of the Catholic Church here in the Southwest. God is good to us and despite the many challenges we face, there is so much evidence of grace and hope in our midst. Of course, these episodes are complemented by the tireless work of our women religious, our marvelous lay leaders, those who work at the Catholic Center, and those laity serving in our parishes. The Body of Christ, made of living stones, is thriving and growing as it has in this archdiocese for the past 400 plus years. Christ promised to be with us until the end of the age and there are none who know that better than we. Soon after this writing, I will be privileged to celebrate Mass at Santa Ana Pueblo for their feast day. The next day, I will celebrate Mass at the Morada de Santana in Las Vegas, New Mexico. Grace abounds. Thanks be to God!

Sincerely yours in the Risen Lord,

Most Rev. John C. Wester, Archbishop of Santa Fe