

Reflecting back on the last 10 years: ‘My blessings have been many’

Bishop Timothy L. Doherty

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It has been ten years since being consecrated as the sixth bishop of this diocese. I received news of my appointment on an April Friday afternoon after the funeral of a beloved local firefighter. Emergency vehicles representing other towns were still in the parish parking lot. Connecting the dots between then and now requires more time than I can give.

The intervening time is marked by a couple of U.S. presidents, surprising Supreme Court decisions, and the first resignation of a pope since 1296. I met Pope Benedict XVI during my February 2012 *ad limina apostolorum* visit to Rome. In 2013, Argentine-born Mario Jorge Bergoglio came to be Pope Francis. It was December 2019 before I got close enough to shake his hand at a long bishops’ group conversation with him during another required *ad limina* visit.

How different the men, how different the times, even in ten years. Pope Benedict’s book on the Apostles was part of my pre-bishop retreat. His writings on faith, hope and charity are classics, as is his apostolic exhortation on God’s Word, *Verbum Domini*. Pope Francis’ writings on marriage and on human ecology are just two works that follow a method he brought with him to Rome: see, judge, act. It is difficult to see with the eyes of faith the realities before us because the truth of things can be so searing. But judging and acting justly require that first stage. Francis often has promoted the Scripture and instituted an annual Word of God Sunday. I am glad that I picked a teachable episcopal motto: “The Word of God is not chained.” (2 Timothy 2:9)

My blessings have been many here, starting with the dedicated body of priests and deacons. Active laity in parishes and my offices teach me as well as serve with me. Celebrations of the Mass and sacraments become more significant to me, their mystery – what they tell us of God’s action in the world – only deepens.

There are challenges, of course, many of which are inherited. Administrative obligations and moral dilemmas furnish me with more than enough to do. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops offers a valuable fraternal communion, and I have done quite a bit of national committee work in healthcare, then in safeguarding children. Archbishop Sambri (d. 2011) who called me with my appointment later personally told me that I must be active in the Conference. Another task of local bishops requires carrying the burdens resulting from sexual abuse of children. In spite of national reports that seem to say the problem in the church is still huge, the statistics about when abuse events occurred still show the spike between 1975 and 1981. Most survivors that I have talked to set their experiences in these years. Healing of people and of the church has a ways to go.

A bishop’s main role is to be an advocate for the faith and a promoter of unity. There are many books on these things which are conditioned by history and present circumstances. And they never get finished and they won’t be until the Second Coming.

The challenge to be unified is repeated in each era. Part of the Office of Readings for July 6 quotes Pope St. Clement’s letter to the Corinthians. “Why are there strife and passion, schisms and even war among you? Do we not possess the same Spirit of grace which was given to us and the same calling in Christ.

Why do we tear apart and divide the body of Christ? Why do we revolt against our own body?" The appeal for unity applies to all of us.

With the deaths and economic devastation stemming from the COVID-19 crisis, and with the healthcare crisis that uncovers the scale of racial inequalities, we have much to be anxious about. People of hope look at problem solving as opportunities to serve their church and society. Head shaking won't get it done. In a recent interview, retired London police superintendent John Sutherland said: "We live in this impatient short-term society where we want an instant understanding of something and an instant solution. The starting point has to be to gain a better understanding of what we are dealing with. In a civilized society we have an absolute responsibility to try and understand what is going on. Unless we do, we don't have any chance of fixing it." Understanding is harder to achieve in tense times, until we reach out or accept an invitation to meet with people who want what is good and helpful. No one expects another to work alone. Unity provides strength and hope.

Some, but not all frictions in the Church are signs of sin or failure. St. John Henry Newman talks about this in his book *Apologia pro vita sua*. "Catholic Christendom...presents a continuous picture of Authority and Private Judgement alternately advancing and retreating as the ebb and flow of the tide;...it is a vast assemblage of human beings...brought together into one by the beauty and majesty of a Superhuman Power...brought together as if into some moral factory, for the melting, refining, and moulding by an incessant, noisy process, of the raw material of human nature, so excellent, so dangerous, so capable of divine purposes."

Any successful path forward for us must be in, through and to Christ. To follow him through the Gospels is to be at his side as he heals the sick, encounters the minorities of his day, sits with the grieving, feeds the hungry and teaches the ignorant, support ones working for justice. And to suffer for others, not just suffer from. His yoke is easy, and his burden is light because when we pick it up, he helps us to carry it. This we believe.

God bless you and thank you for your prayers.