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Celebrating the diocese's first shepherd

Bishop Begley's missionary spirit, legacy endure in Diocese of Charlotte

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editor

CHARLOTTE — The diocese's first shepherd may no longer be with us, but his legacy still shines throughout North Carolina.

March 12 was the 100th anniversary of the birth of Bishop Michael J. Begley, the first bishop of the Diocese of Charlotte.

Bishop Begley, born in 1909 in West Springfield, Mass., was ordained bishop of the newly-established diocese on Jan. 12, 1972. He served as bishop until his retirement on May 29, 1984.

"I realize I am among the chosen few to be graced with answering the call to serve through the priestly ministry and again serve as a bishop," wrote Bishop Begley in a late-1980s series of columns.

"I have never taken either role for granted nor have I assumed I was worthy to have them," he said.

But the foundations he laid, the impressions he made and the friendships he forged have survived and flourished long after his death in High Point on Feb. 9, 2002, at the age of 92.

"I would describe him as a man of God, who had zeal for the salvation of souls, and whose enthusiasm for his ministry was catching — you were drawn into that enthusiasm and that zeal for his work," said Bishop Peter J. Jugis in a 2002 reflection of Bishop Begley.

Bishop Jugis is one of the many priests in the dioceses of both Charlotte and Raleigh who have been inspired by this "good and holy man of God," as Bishop Begley was described by one of his successors, Bishop Emeritus William G. Curlin.

A shepherd's mission

Bishop Begley was ordained a priest of the Diocese of Raleigh on May 26, 1934. He knew years prior that he would become a priest.

"It was not unusual for Catholic boys to consider a life in the priesthood and to enter seminary upon graduation from high school," wrote Bishop Begley. "I was one of those young men."

His priestly career carried him throughout the state, where he served in parishes in both the Diocese of Raleigh and what would later become the Diocese of Charlotte.

His first assignment was as pastor of St. Mary Church in Wilmington. Next he was sent to serve as assistant pastor of St. Edward Church in High Point.

He served as pastor of St. Therese Church in Wrightsville Beach, Immaculate Conception Church in Carolina Beach and St. Leo the Great Church in Winston-Salem.

In 1955 he became the founding pastor of St. Ann Church in Charlotte, where, as a monsignor, he would baptize in 1957 a baby who would later become the fourth bishop of Charlotte.

“I had the honor of being baptized by the future bishop of the diocese,” said Bishop Jugis.

“When I was growing up, I had always heard about Msgr. Begley and what a wonderful pastor he was — and what a wonderful person he was,” he said.

Bishop Begley served also as superintendent of the Diocese of Raleigh’s Catholic orphanage and was serving as pastor of Our Lady of Grace Church in Greensboro when he was appointed by Pope Paul VI as the first bishop of Charlotte in 1971.

By coincidence, Bishop Begley was a cousin of Bishop William J. Hafey, first bishop of Raleigh.

“I was challenged to begin a new role in leadership and set up the newly-established Diocese of Charlotte,” recalled Bishop Begley.

“But the details of being a bishop were not nearly as challenging as the transformation of my attitudes,” he said. “Where once I was a peer among my priests, now I was their leader. Where once I was charged with caring for the spiritual lives of my parishioners, now I must care for the entire diocese”

Fruitful journey

During his tenure as bishop, he quickly earned a widespread reputation as a kind-hearted champion of the poor, an enthusiastic bridge-builder in the ecumenical community and a humble administrator who counted on the blessings and contributions of many.

As chairman of the Catholic Committee on Appalachia (CCA), he led 26 bishops from 13 states in issuing a joint pastoral letter on the state of the powerless in the mountain region in 1975. “This Land is Home to Me” attracted national attention for its forthright approach to the problems of the people in the economically-depressed area.

“Through the work I did on CCA, I came to know the Appalachian families and the struggles they faced. I was moved by their spirit and humbled by their poor existence,” wrote Bishop Begley.

“I had a clearer understanding of the need for the church to reach out to all people, but especially the poor,” he said.

“He was really a man of prayer,” said Msgr. John McSweeney in his homily during Bishop Begley’s Mass of Christian burial at St. Gabriel Church in Charlotte Feb. 15, 2002.

“With strength from his divine office, his daily Mass, his rosary and devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, he worked hard and long hours,” said Msgr. McSweeney, pastor of St. Matthew Church in Charlotte and the first priest ordained for the Diocese of Charlotte in 1974.

“He was focused on his work, but always as the shepherd of the diocese,” said Msgr. McSweeney. “He was a bridge who brought unity to his priests and much happiness to his new diocese and its people.”

Bishop Begley wrote upon his retirement that he was satisfied with his career and life.

“I accepted the plans God laid before me,” he said. “Though the road was sometimes twisting and covered in fog, the journey has been exciting and fruitful. And what more could I ask?”

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