

The Graces of April

There is a moving scene with a memorable quotation at the end of Georges Bernanos thought provoking novel, *The Diary of a Country Priest*. A parish priest assigned to a difficult rural parish is dying. He is spending his last days with a former classmate and as he prepares to meet the Lord, he whispers to his friend that “Grace is everywhere.” The friend later writes to the priest’s mentor and tells him of the priest’s words: “Grace is everywhere.” That quotation and that scene came to mind frequently during this past month, both in Italy and here at home in the United States.

It came to mind each morning as we journeyed with eighty-three pilgrims, parishioners and friends of the Diocese of Ogdensburg. Each morning at Mass in the sunny land of Italy we prayed for an increase of vocations to the priesthood, the diaconate, and consecrated life throughout the Church, but especially in our own beloved North Country. Pilgrims usually carry with them their own special intentions. I was praying for each of you throughout the journey. But I also prayed in a special way that God would strengthen our families, make them holy and bless them with new vocations to the priesthood, the diaconate, and consecrated life.

At St. Mark’s in Venice, at St. Anthony’s in Padua, at the Church of St. Catherine in Siena, at the tomb of St. Francis in Assisi, in the open air of St.

Peter's Square with Pope Benedict and in the majesty of St. Peter's Basilica, in the quiet of the lovely baroque chapel of the Casa Santa Maria, the graduate house of the North American College, and at other Churches, in which we were privileged to pray, we prayed that God would open the minds and hearts of the young people of our diocese to respond generously to God's call. In all of these places, I was reminded that grace is everywhere and everything is a grace. There were so many times during this past month that I felt God's grace.

- **At St. Peter's Square on April 2nd as Pope Benedict XVI celebrated Mass on the third anniversary of the death of Pope John Paul II. More than forty thousand people were there remembering this servant of God and celebrating his life.**
- **It was a grace to be with our eighty-three pilgrims. They were on a wonderful journey to deepen their faith and to strengthen their hope. As always on these trips there was much walking. But people know that on a pilgrimage every step is meant to bring us a step closer to God.**

And then how lucky we were to have the Holy Father visit us in our own country from April 15th to the 20th! Approximately 700 people in our diocese were privileged to attend some of the ceremonies associated with that pastoral journey. For thousands of others, the television images are still fresh in their minds reminding them again that "Grace is everywhere" and everything is a grace. Recall with me these moments of grace:

- **The warm welcome accorded Pope Benedict XVI by President George W. Bush at an official ceremony on the south lawn of the**

White House. The Holy Father came as a friend and a preacher of the gospel. The Pope reminded us that our “freedom is not only a gift, but also a summons to personal responsibility,” where we need to bring our personal convictions based on firm moral principles, to public life.

- **Together with about 350 Bishops from the United States, I prayed Vespers with the Holy Father in the Crypt Church of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. I listened to his words of encouragement and hope for the future. He spoke of the importance of the family and of our need to strengthen traditional family life, reminding us that families are the primary place for evangelization, for passing on the faith, for helping young people to appreciate the importance of religious practice and Sunday observance. And he spoke of the deep shame that was caused by some clerics who have betrayed their priestly obligations and duties by immoral behavior.**
- **At the Nationals Park, forty-eight thousand people joined the Holy Father for the celebration of Mass. It was edifying to see the large number of people receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation prior to the celebration of the Liturgy. At Mass the Holy Father encouraged us to pray that the Holy Spirit will pour out His gifts upon the Church, the gifts that lead to conversion, forgiveness, and growth in holiness. As people of hope, we must live our lives differently as Christ Jesus leads us towards the vision of a world reconciled.**
- **His meeting with Catholic educators at the Catholic University of America reminding them of the important role they play in the growth of the Church. Sister Ellen Rose Coughlin, SSJ, our Diocesan Superintendent of Schools was privileged to be among those distinguished leaders. The Holy Father acknowledged our countries “remarkable network of parochial schools” that have contributed to the spiritual well-being of the Church and the nation. Although sacrifice is required to maintain these institutions of learning, Catholic schools, colleges and universities are “first and foremost a place to encounter the living God” and as such call for the support of “the entire Catholic community.”**
- **At the United Nations he spoke about the importance of human rights for all individuals including the most fundamental of all rights, the right to life.**

- Each of the 195 dioceses of the country was invited to send two representatives to Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral. The Diocese of Ogdensburg was represented by Father Bernard Menard, our most recently ordained priest and by Sister Ellen Donahue, S.A., my Delegate to the Religious of the Diocese. Here we celebrated the 3rd anniversary of the election of Cardinal Ratzinger as Pope Benedict XVI asking God to grant him good health and happiness as he leads us to a world of greater justice and peace.
- One of the most moving events for me was the meeting with youth at St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers. There were approximately 32,000 young people there for an afternoon of prayer and music. About 200 young people from our diocese, including our seminarians from St. Charles Seminary, were present. There the Pope spoke to the young people about the important contributions they can make in life and about the importance of maintaining correct values. He expressed his great hope for them and for their future and assured them of his love.
- At the Mass at Yankee Stadium, close to 60,000 individuals gathered on a cool, bright and sunny day. The crowds again responded to his message showing the love and affection the Church in the United States has for him and for the See of Peter.

These momentary glances will become the memories of a lifetime and assure us that "Grace is everywhere" and everything is a grace.

I am deeply grateful to Pope Benedict XVI for coming to our country, for sharing his faith, hope and love for Christ with us and giving us an opportunity to show our love and loyalty to the Vicar of Christ, the successor of St. Peter. May the Lord preserve and protect him, give him a long life and make him blessed upon the earth.

Most Reverend Robert J. Cunningham
Bishop of Ogdensburg
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