

**“YEAR OF THE PRIEST” REMARKS**

**Hon. Robert G. Main, Jr.**

**8 November 2009**

**Crowne Plaza Hotel**

**Lake Placid, New York**

Sr. Donna,

Fr. LaValley and all the priests we honor today,

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am here this afternoon to say “thank you”. It’s always a good thing to say, probably even upon those occasions when we are not really certain that we are all that thankful.

Fortunately, I am not in that predicament today.

I am filled with thanks!

First of all, thank you very much for the great honor of having the opportunity to speak to the priests of our diocese some words of gratitude for myself and, more importantly, on behalf of all of the people of the Diocese of Ogdensburg. When Sr. Donna called to ask me to speak, I was both flattered and a bit taken aback. Why me? Of course, she was most

kind and gracious, engaging in some pleasant conversation and waiting until I had accepted, before telling me that I was not actually the committee's first choice. I was momentarily deflated. No one likes to be "second best". Just ask the Phillies or the Red Sox! But when I found out that Archbishop Dollan had been invited first, I really didn't feel so bad. After all, just being on the same list is pretty heady indeed. I am certain that the Archbishop had no better invitation this afternoon, but I am delighted that he had another obligation.

Second, let me thank Sr. Donna and Catholic Charities for hosting this gathering. Beyond our appreciation for this afternoon's gathering, we should all be preparing to congratulate and thank Catholic Charities, as a national organization, as it stands on the threshold of its own 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary next year.

The day to day work of Catholic Charities is enormously important, and, in this diocese, it is done extraordinarily well. I can give testimony

to that personally. As a judge, particularly in the area of domestic relations, the availability of Catholic Charities' services is a tremendous asset. The fruits of its labors make lives better for thousands of people, many of them children who benefit from the counseling and other services provided to them and to their parents.

This was a wonderful dinner: good food, fine drink, and memorable conversation. It reminded me of a short story which came to me earlier in the week by email and which some of you have probably heard. A minister was completing a temperance sermon. With great emphasis he said, "If I had all the beer in the world, I'd take it and pour it into the river." With even greater emphasis he said, "If I had all the wine in the world, I'd take it and pour it into the river." And then, finally, shaking his fist in the air, he said, "And if I had all of the whiskey in the world, I take it and pour it into the river."

Sermon complete, he sat down. The Leader of Song stood and announced, with a smile, nearly

laughing, “For our closing song, let us sing Hymn Number 365, ‘Shall We Gather at the River.’”

Let me turn to the task at hand. When Sr. Donna gave me my instructions, they were brief. I could say anything I wanted. I guessed she didn’t know me very well. But I couldn’t take any longer than twenty minutes. She knew me better than I thought! I am grateful for the liberty to speak as I wish. You may be grateful for the time limitation.

William Arthur Ward told us that feeling gratitude, and not expressing it, is like wrapping a present and not giving it. I like presents; and I like them wrapped well. I hope that these words of mine this afternoon are a suitable wrapping for the gratitude we all share for our priests. Let’s face it. If, as the church teaches us, we are a Eucharistic people, our existence as Catholics cannot be separated from our priests.

Each Sunday morning, as a matter of habit, as well as faith, I take my place in the same pew just before the 7:45 Mass begins at Notre Dame Church in Malone. I sit just beyond the stained glass window that depicts and honors St. John Vianney, your patron as parish priests. It is, of course, the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death in 1859 that inspired Pope Benedict to institute this Year of the Priest. On these last several Sundays, as I sat in my pew, I have gazed more intently at that window wondering what I might say to you.

Then, a couple of Sundays ago, just as I was getting ready to leave for Mass, the telephone rang at my home. A friend, the scheduled lector, sick with the flu, was calling to ask if I could read for her. I quickly looked at the two readings and left for church. Sitting in my pew, glancing at that window again for inspiration, it hit me. The second reading, from the Letter to the Hebrews, which I was about to read, was the inspiration I was looking for.

Perhaps you recognize a part of it:

Every high priest is taken from among men and made their representative before God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

He is able to deal patiently with the ignorant and erring, for he himself is beset by weakness and so, for this reason must make sin offerings for himself as well as for the people. No one takes this honor upon himself but only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

As I read the letter out loud, it struck me more and more that the words captured the essence of what our priests are, and why we are so grateful for them.

Thank you for being our representatives before God. Thank you for offering gifts and

sacrifices for our sins. Thank you for dealing patiently with our ignorance and our errors. Thank you for acknowledging your own weakness but not letting that stand in the way of answering the call as Aaron did.

As we prepare to enter the second decade of the third millennium, one could easily ask the question “Why did you answer the call as you did?”

Certainly, for those of you who are older, the culture was somewhat different and a religious vocation not so contrary to the values of the day. And yet you have had to adjust to incredible change within the church and in society at large. But you have persevered; you have kept the faith. You have guided us through turbulent times in our own lives, even as you coped with the changes in your own. Thank you.

Those of you who are younger are a greater

marvel in my eyes. A religious vocation seems entirely at odds with the values that are represented in the secular culture which dominates all aspects of society today. Scandal and betrayal had beset the church to which you were pledging your lives. Mere accusations against a tiny fragment of priests are regarded as proof against all. The church itself sometimes seems fearful to defend its own and to have forgotten that its mission is redemption, not banishment. But you have not been afraid to give your lives in service to the Beatitudes we listened to in the All Saints Day Gospel last Sunday. Thank you.

Thank you all for the Masses you offer for us, from early in the morning until late evening.

Pardon us for not always taking full advantage of what you offer us in Christ's name and for grumbling that they are not as convenient as they used to be.

Thank you all for the healing hand that

you extend in the confessional and as you anoint us when we are sick or dying. Pardon us for not always taking full advantage of the gifts you bear.

Thank you all for listening to our grievances about each other, about you, and about the Church. Pardon us for being so petty.

Thank you for the time you spend in prayer for us. Pardon us when we do not remember that you need our prayers as well.

Thank you for correcting us gently – mostly – when we stray and forget what we are called to be as Catholic Christians. Pardon us for not listening and acting as we should.

Thank you for sitting with us when we worry and grieve. Pardon us when we do not follow your example and take care of our brothers and sisters.

Thank you for being the salt in our faith.  
Pardon us when we let it go flat.

Thank you for the sacrifice of giving up families of your own and for being willing to be a part of ours. Pardon us when we expect too much or ask too little.

Thank you for answering the call as you did. Pardon us for not praying hard enough for vocations and for not encouraging young men to follow your example.

Pardon us for to often taking you for granted. Thank you for not holding it against us.

You serve us at an incredible time in the history of our faith, our church, and our culture.

In that way, you are very much like St. John Vianney whose own times were beset with revolution and secularism. After all, he made his First Communion in a private home where

the windows were covered so that the light from the candles could not be seen from the outside. He continued his formation in secrecy and, later, hidden in the mountains as an army deserter. He began his priesthood in the aftermath of the French Revolution which had produced a great religious ignorance. And yet, before he died, almost forty-four years later, he was known internationally and twenty thousand people a year traveled on pilgrimage to his confessional in Ars. What a difference he made. You too, in ways large and small, make that difference in the lives of every Catholic in this diocese. Thank you.

As some of you know, I like to travel. Like all of you, I hope that heaven will be my final destination, though many trips down the road. Every trip needs an itinerary, or at least a map. And sometimes a trip needs a guide. And so it is with the journey to heaven. As I see it, those Beatitudes are a pretty good map. And all of you are pretty good guides. Thank you.

On an occasion like this, it is hard not to let personal feelings intrude. I am personally grateful to so many of you for the example you have given me, for the roles you have played in my life, and for the friendship you have extended to me. And while I promised myself that I would not mention any one present in my remarks, I can mention two who are not.

Here are two more stories. But these are true.

First, in the darkest days of the Second World War, my father spent three and a half years in the South Pacific as a Marine. His parents, his Protestant parents, his very Protestant parents were alone in Malone, worried about him, just like many other parents.

My dad had met a Catholic priest on the golf course. Imagine that! Before my dad left, the priest gave him a medal which my father carried with him throughout his deployment. Every week, for those three and a half years, when

Father Francis McMahon came to Malone from his parish in St. Regis Falls, he stopped at 90 Elm Street, the family home in Malone, to check on my grandparents and to inquire about my father. No proselytizing, just witness. At a time when relations between Christian denominations were more hostile than harmonious, who knows what impact that extraordinary kindness had on my grandparents.

All I know is that my grandparents, prominent Protestants, made no complaint when my father married my very Catholic mother. I know that you offer that same witness in the world today. Thank you.

Finally, at the time of Pope Benedict's installation, I had the good fortune of being in Rome. One morning, leaving St. Peter's, we encountered two men, obviously bishops. They were on their way in; we were on our way out. For some reason they stopped and so did we. They asked where we were from. When they learned we were from Ogdensburg, one

inquired, “Did you ever know Tony Pease?” I told him that he had been the assistant at my parish while I was in high school and that he had been a great inspiration. He told us that he had been a classmate of Fr. Pease at the North American College in Rome. He simply said “I believe that he was the kindest man I ever knew.” While he had Fr. Pease correctly pegged, he obviously had not had the pleasure of your company for you offer that same kindness and inspiration to all of us. Thank you.

My time is up. I hope that my gratitude was wrapped and bowed well enough to make it clear to you how much the people of this diocese appreciate you.

May the will of God never take you where the grace of God will not protect you.

Thank you very much.