Catholic Diocese marks 25th year

By DOUG LeBLANC
Advocate religion editor

Roman Catholics in the 200,000-member Diocese of Baton Rouge will get an early start at giving thanks on Sunday, holding a Mass to celebrate the diocese's 25th year.

As the anniversary approached, Bishop Stanley Joseph Ott discussed the diocese's future.

The diocese completes its 2 1/2-year program called RENEW this week, and it will embark on a new, long-range program emphasizing 'spiritual formation' and keeping alive the small groups started by RENEW, the bishop said.

"Our next step is spiritual formation," the bishop said. "You cannot do that unless you know your faith."

To that end, the bishop has created the Bishop Robert E. Tracy Center at the Catholic Life Center. The center, named for the diocese's first bishop, will offer continuing education to leaders and laity in the Catholic Church who want a deeper understanding of their faith.

The bishop told of hearing RENEW praised during recent diocesan conferences for black Catholics and for the unemployed.

"At both conferences, I heard again and again: 'Don't let RENEW die. We need our small groups,' " the bishop said.

He considers those pleas a vindication of the program, which has met with sharp criticism by conservatives, both nationally and in the Baton Rouge diocese.

"Every good tree bears good fruit," Ott said. "When I see about 20,000 people reading the Bible together, praying together and sharing their faith, it has to be a blessing."

"I think there were some good concerns — that we have to have content and we've got to retain our Catholic faith — and the program has been improved," he said. "I think we can respond to criticism in a positive way."

Ott, who was moved by Bishop Tracy from LSU's Catholic Student Center to St. Joseph Cathedral in 1961, compared the diocese's growth to that of downtown Baton Rouge.

"When I went downtown, there were just two tall buildings — the State Capitol and the old LNB building," he said. "Since then, Baton Rouge's modest skyline has added a new LNB tower, One American Place, the Riverside Centreplex and a few other buildings."

"I think this Catholic Life Center is another image of growth — it is the hub of activity in our diocese," he said.

The Catholic Life Center houses the diocesan offices, the bishop's residence, the Guardian Angels School and Catholic Community Services.

It also plays host regularly to meetings of Catholics, Protestants and interfaith groups, such as the Greater Baton Rouge Federation of Churches and Synagogues.

Ott praised the decision to establish a Diocese of Baton Rouge, which comprises 12 parishes.

"The church has come to see that whenever it is realistic and whenever it is possible, it is better to have a local bishop," he said. "I think it (the church) would not be as well-developed as it is today, had the diocese not been created."

"The archbishop of New Orleans simply doesn't have the time to visit Baton Rouge very often."

After 25 years, "there is a sense of family, a sense of community, a sense of church," the bishop said. "I think we've come to have a real sense of who we are."

"I sense a sense of collaboration, a sense of willingness to work together, which is the key for a bishop, and for which I'm very grateful," he said.

Ott also discussed the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' annual meeting, held Nov. 10-13 in Washington, D.C.

"I was pleased, because my personal choices for president and vice president were elected," he said.

Archbishop John L. May of St. Louis, the new NCCB president, and Archbishop Daniel E. Pilarczyk of Cincinnati, his vice president, are both considered moderates in the theological struggles of the church.

Ott remembered a talk Pilarczyk gave on vocations during the summer. "It was so good that he was the only bishop to get a standing ovation from his brother bishops," he said, describing the new vice president as "perceptive, articulate and analytical."

"I think Archbishop Pilarczyk has a real gift of seeing the church law and applying it with sensitivity, compassion and prudence," Ott said.

He also praised May. "I call him one of our own, because he was bishop in Mobile for 10 years," he said.

"By far, the situation in Seattle took center stage," Ott said, referring to the Vatican's decision to transfer Seattle Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen's authority in five areas to an auxiliary bishop. Hunthausen has been a vehement critic of U.S. military policy. His detractors maintain, however, that he met with Rome's disapproval for granting use of the Seattle cathedral to Dignity, a national organization that advocates changes in Vatican teachings on homosexuality.

Hunthausen also has been accused of tolerating experimental Masses and being too generous with group absolution of sins.

"It was a matter that affected not only Catholics in the Northwest. It affected Catholics throughout the country," Ott said. "Archbishop Pio Laghi (the Vatican's Apostolic Delegate to the United States) has suffered abuse and the Holy See has suffered abuse, as well as the two bishops in Seattle."

"You could sense that we wanted to support the two bishops in this delicate matter, but we also wanted to support the Holy Father and the Holy See," he said.

Ott praised a statement by outgoing president Bishop James W. Malone of Youngstown, Ohio. His statement was adopted by the bishops as their response to the controversy.

"The conference of bishops has no authority to intervene in the internal affairs of a diocese or in the unique relationship between the Pope and individual bishops," Malone's statement said. "By universal church law and the conference itself the conference is not able to review, much less judge, a case involving a diocesan bishop and the Holy See."

"With specific reference to Seattle, while we are not authorized to judge the facts of the case, I believe it is clear that the process employed by the Holy See was in accord with general principles of Church law and procedures," Malone wrote. "The decision reached at the end of the process was made by proper Church authorities. As such, it deserves our respect and confidence. While there appear to have been misunderstandings at one point or another along the way, the need now is to look to the future, not the past, and carry out the decision."

"This letter was approved almost unanimously," Ott said. "I think the Holy Spirit was really with us."

Ott also was enthusiastic about final adoption of "Economic Justice for All," the bishops' pastoral letter on Catholic social teaching and the U.S. economy.

During the five years of its preparation, the pastoral has generated much heat among conservatives, who believe it criticizes capitalism too harshly.

Ott said the pastoral will be part of the diocese's plans for spiritual formation.

"I think for the next 20 years this pastoral on the economy is going to have a profound impact on our universities and on our culture," the bishop said. "I think it's going to be a real service to people of good will, whatever their persuasion."

Meanwhile, Ott and his flock have an anniversary to celebrate.

The anniversary Mass will begin at 3 p.m. at the LSU Assembly Center.

At noon Monday, Ott will dedicate the burial place of his predecessors, Tracy and Joseph Sullivan, during a Mass at St. Joseph Cathedral. Their bodies were moved from Roselawn Cemetery to the cathedral during Holy Week.