Bishop Flynn taking over

By JIM BRADSHAW
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Bishop Harry J. Flynn, now the fourth bishop of the Diocese of Lafayette, is the first leader of the diocese who is not a native Louisiana.

When he first arrived here, he admits, he knew about as much about south Louisiana as most of us down here could tell him about his native Schenectady, N.Y.

That was nearly three years ago, when he was named coadjutor bishop to share episcopal duties with Bishop Gerard Frey — who steps down this weekend after having reached the mandatory retirement age of 75.

"Frankly, I was a bit apprehensive when I first came to Louisiana," Flynn remembers. "I had never traveled to Louisiana and knew very little about the place."

Since then, as coadjutor bishop and vicar general of Lafayette, he has traveled all over the place, visiting practically every parish, school and institution in the diocese. He's learned a little bit more about us now, says he's liked what he's learned, and thinks the lessons will stand him in good stead now as he assumes the episcopal reins.

The past three years have been an advantage," he says, "in that I have been able to meet the people and learn about the place. I've found the people here very warm and friendly, the priests open and receptive to me. I've been made to feel welcome... There is a tremendous spirit of generosity here. The people will share whatever they have."

Flynn, 56, was born May 2, 1933 to William H. and Margaret Mahoney Flynn. He was ordained May 18, 1960 for the diocese of Albany, N.Y., and was assigned to St. Margaret of Cortona Church in Rotterdam Junction, N.Y. From there he became assistant pastor at St. Peter Church, Troy, N.Y., then Dean of Men and, later, vice rector and rector of the Mount St. Mary Seminary.

In 1979 he was named director of continuing education for the Albany diocesan clergy and then served as pastor of St. Ambrose Parish, Latham, N.Y., from 1981 to 1986. It was from that position that he came to the Diocese of Lafayette.

He has had a further advantage in preparing himself for the role he now assumes, in that he arrived in the Lafayette diocese just at the beginning of a three-year process of self-study as part of the Diocesan Synod — a process designed to formulate the goals and policies of the Church here for the next decade.

"Through the Synod process I was able to meet with leadership segments — priests, religious, lay people — from all of the diverse parts of the diocese, and to hear them as they expressed their vision of the church," he says. "Now we will begin to mold those views into policies and regulations that are definitive enough to give direction, yet broad enough for wide application."

Once again, the new bishop says, the process will involve the people of the diocese — literally thousands of them participated in the first phase, designing the general "constitution" from which more specific regulations will now spring. He says that the diocesan policies now to be developed must fit into the canons of the Church, but must also reflect the "style and substance" of the Church in Acadiana.

"What we must do next is to make certain that we keep the people involved in the Church," he says. "We must give the people a deeper understanding of what the Church is and what it is about."

"The Church is the 'Pilgrim Spouse of Jesus Christ,'" he says. "We are truly on a continuing journey. We must continue looking for a deeper conversion, must continue purifying its members in moving toward the goal to which we are all called."

One of the more specific goals, he says, is to bring more people more actively into the Church.

"I would like to see more of those who are baptized into the Church become more active in it," Flynn says. "In some way we must be able to convey to them, perhaps through the media, what it is that they are missing."

"Jesus left such a legacy in his Word and in the Eucharist," he continues. "These people must be brought to a fuller understanding of this legacy, of just what it is and what it means. We clamar to see celebrities... and this is so much greater. If we truly understand it, this legacy of Jesus, we would clamor for it as well."

He notes too that the legacy of the Church is an integral part of Acadiana, and that this heritage reaches across the culture.

"All of the people of his area have suffered in some way for the faith," he points out. "The Acadians, the black people, the Vietnamese who have come here more recently, all have suffered, all have held onto the faith so that it could be handed down to the next generation."

As he's traveled the diocese he's found that faith and legacy expressed in diverse ways, he says. Liturgies developed by and for black Catholics or Vietnamese communities, for example, are expressive of their individual cultures, "beautiful in their diversity and their richness," he says.

Because of the large number of Catholics in the population, the Lafayette diocese has, in some cases, a "mission" diocese, particularly in that it has never had enough native priests to meet its needs. A number of religious orders continue to staff the diocese and will continue to do so — but there are also now more seminarians studying for the priesthood than the diocese has enjoyed for many years.

Is there some particular reason for the increase in vocations?

"You've got to take the long view," Bishop Flynn says. "Did you realize, for example, that the Diocese of Vienna (Austria) once went for 80 years without ordaining a priest?"

As for the increase locally, he says, perhaps more young men are hearing the call to their vocation.

"God always calls," the new bishop says. "People have always been called, but they don't always hear. We live in a noisy culture, and the call of God is sometimes not heard. We need spaces to get in touch with ourselves, an atmosphere where his message can be heard."

The bishop says another of his goals will be to work to continue to increase vocations from the diocese.

"When Bishop Frey and I visited Rome last year on our ab ilimina Apostolorum (to the threshold of the Apostles) visit, one of the things Pope John Paul told us as we sat across the desk from him was to 'get the vocations for the priesthood from the native soil of Louisiana,' This is something we will seek to do."

And how will he do the seeking? How will things change now that he is bishop?

"Every leader has a different style," he says. "I'm certain that my leadership style is different than that of Bishop Frey. I am a bit more outgoing, perhaps. I like people and like to be among them. I have a hands-on philosophy toward life and leadership."

"But I also do have the philosophy that 'you don't fix the wheel that works,' so there is not going to be change just for the sake of change."

What's he found to be the biggest difference between leading as a pastor and leading as a bishop?

"The problems. I can look back on my years as pastor — and I was pastor of a big parish — and I don't remember that many problems. I'm sure there must have been some, but none that I really remember. But in a diocese, especially a large and diverse diocese, there are many personalities, many very good people who have different views about different ways of expressing these views. We shouldn't be surprised that they sometimes differ. It's part of the pilgrimange. There will always be different ways of looking at things."

And what will be the first priority of the new Bishop of Lafayette?

"I need to make certain that my life is very close to God," Flynn says. "From that, that same turning toward God will flow to the people and the work of the diocese. I can't think first about programs. I need simply to turn to the Lord and make sure He is in my life."