Bishop Hicks' Column

September 2023

1,000 DAYS

RECENTLY, SOME FRIENDS AND I WERE DEBATING if "milleversary" is a real word. I'd never heard of it, but some insisted it is a legitimate word that means 1,000-day anniversary. Some cleverly invented alternatives like "kiloversary," or "k-day."

This summer I celebrated my "milleversary" here in the Diocese of Joliet. September 29 will mark three years since I was installed as your bishop. I still remember my installation Mass as if it were yesterday. It was in the midst of the pandemic. Even though my heart raced with joy and excitement as I walked down the aisle and looked around, I thought to myself, *what strange days these are with the pews only 20 percent filled with masked people*.

After the installation, I spent my first year in deliberate listening mode. I strived to get to know the diocese, the history of the parishes, the nature of the schools, the experiences of the priests and deacons, the presence of the religious men and women, the involvement of the laity, the breadth of ministries, the status of our finances and the source of our donations and resources. Like assembling pieces of a puzzle, I began to form a clearer picture of our diocese that included both the good and the bad.

I quickly realized the expanse of our diocese. With 125 parishes and missions contained in 4,218 square miles within seven counties, our footprint is enormous. Before arriving in Joliet—during my six years as Vicar General in the archdiocese of Chicago—I walked each day to my office in the pastoral center. As a result, I averaged only about 6,000 miles per year using my car. Comparatively, I now drive about 22,000 miles per year.

But I'm certainly not complaining. I am truly most happy when I get out from behind my desk and am out "in the vineyard" with you, the people of God, celebrating our faith and salvation in the Lord Jesus. Though each parish has a unique "personality," they all share the common trait of gracious hospitality.

I am deeply moved when I witness the pastoral leadership of our priests, deacons and staff members. I am touched by how much our parishioners love the Lord, the Blessed Mother, your communities of faith and your families.

Naturally, when I first arrived, I had to come to grips with some of the challenges facing our diocese, many of which were caused by the pandemic. These issues included budgetary concerns caused by decreasing attendance and contributions. With ever-shifting demographics, I was made aware of how some parishes and schools are experiencing great growth, while others are in substantial decline.

Two years ago, when I launched our Targeted Restructuring process, my first goal was to reorganize the diocesan offices while embracing a diocesan vision of Catechesis, Evangelization and Faith into Action. Since then, we also have turned our attention to consolidating or closing some specific parishes and schools, so that our diocese will continue to thrive vibrantly and meet the needs of all those we serve.

Through it all, I have emphasized the need to pass our beautiful faith and tradition on to the next generation—as we move from maintenance to mission. I want us to intentionally look for every opportunity to bring more people into the Catholic faith—especially young people—as we continue to encourage them to consider a vocation to the priesthood, religious life and the various ministries in the Church. While doing this at the local level, we also have embraced national movements such as the National Eucharistic Revival, as well as the international Synod on Synodality.

As I reflect on these past 1,000+ days and look forward to my fourth year as your bishop, I am anticipating our launch of the year-long commemoration of our diocese's 75th Anniversary. This celebration will give us the opportunity to remember our past, celebrate our present and look forward with hope.

Your presence, prayers and gifts make this a strong and healthy diocese. Thank YOU for making it so easy for me to say constantly, *I feel happy, blessed and grateful here*.

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