

## **Traveling Companion: New Challenges for New Bishop**

### **Fr. Michael Tracey**

This June, I will have invested twenty-nine years of my life to being a priest in the diocese. I left home and family to serve the people here. I have put down my roots here and made lasting friendships here. I have been blessed with many gifts as well as many opportunities to share them with people, both on a diocesan and parish level. I hope to continue to do so until my retirement as a priest.

Recently, bishop-elect, Thomas Rodi, was appointed our new bishop. He succeeds Bishop Howze who shaped and formed our diocese through its infancy and teenage stages. We thank him for his leadership and service and wish him years of blessings in retirement.

What are some of the challenges and issues our new bishop will face as he leads our diocese through the infancy and teenage stages of the 2000's?

His first challenge is to support his priests. We are the ones who minister in the trenches day after day. We are the ones who have to walk with people through their joys and heartbreaks, their comings and their goings; their commitments and their floundering. We are the bridge-builders between him and his people. We need his support, his encouragement at a time of stress and confusion in the church. We need his moral support and leadership to affirm us in our pastoral decisions, which we don't make or take lightly. We may be an endangered species, but we are loyal, committed and dedicated servants of the Lord.

His second challenge is to form and shape a vision and direction for the church of Biloxi that will guide the bark of Peter through the turbulent waters that buff it from all sides. This vision cannot be funneled down from on high, asking for blind obedience and implementation. Rather it needs the gifts, insights, hands and hearts of those who have to live with it and implement it. It will be owned and executed if we are part of the process of shaping it.

His third challenge is, as scripture says, to prune away what does not bear fruit both on a diocesan and local level. Security was never meant to be an attribute of the kingdom of God, risk was and it too, involves painful dying of some positions and egos and replacing them with new growth, given to new potential.

His fourth challenge is to support local parish initiatives. Growth in the church comes, not from being imposed from the top down but rather from the grassroots up. Local ministers who are gifted and committed are capable of initiatives and programs that can and do meet local needs without such initiatives and programs having to be legislated into chaos by higher authorities.

His fifth challenge is to be a presence that models the presence of Christ in the local church. That presence becomes contagious, and both clergy and laity embrace the good news with a more joyful and enthusiastic demeanor.

His sixth challenge is to allow the diversity of gifts, present in the laity, be tapped, called forth, empowered and channeled into ministry.

His seventh challenge is to recognize the diversity among cultures present in the diocese and to call forth such diversity into ministry.

His eighth challenge is to strengthen the morale of the priests by affirming, supporting, empowering and allowing them to become part of the decision making process that affect both them and the people they serve.

His ninth challenge is to facilitate more opportunities, both on a parish and diocesan level for the laity to have input into, responsibility for, ownership of and engagement in all aspects of parish and diocesan living.

His tenth challenge is to be human and have the willingness to share it so that others can enjoy and serve the Lord in their often frail, but always graced humanity.

Finally, beginnings are both exciting and challenging; filled with hope and promise. By walking together, our own Emmaus journey will be blessed with the Stranger who opens up the scriptures to us and reveals Himself to us in the Breaking of Bread.