

## **Most Reverend Robert Joseph Banks**

**(1990-2003)**

Having served as an auxiliary bishop, a vicar general and moderator of the curia in the Archdiocese of Boston, Bishop Robert Banks came to his position as Bishop of Green Bay with first-hand knowledge and extensive experience in the administration of a diocese. But sifting through all the expectations of a bishop, he saw that the primary responsibility of his Episcopal office, as well as that of the priest, was to preach the Word of God. It is not surprising, then, that as Bishop of Green Bay his energies would be focused upon his teaching office.

He was born on February 26, 1928 to Robert and Rita (Sullivan) Banks in Boston, Massachusetts. Following his early education in Winthrop public schools, Cathedral High School and St. John Seminary in Boston, Robert Banks finished his studies for the priesthood at the North American College and the Gregorian University in Rome. He was ordained to the priesthood in St. John Lateran Basilica in Rome on December 20, 1952. Father Banks then received his Licentiate in Theology in 1953 and his Doctorate in Canon Law from the Lateran University in Rome in 1957.

After ordination, Father Banks was an associate pastor in several parishes until 1959. From 1971-1981, he served as professor of canon law, academic dean, and rector at St. John Seminary (Boston). After leaving St. John Seminary, he served in parish ministry, as Vicar General, and Vicar for Administration; it was during this period that he was ordained and appointed Auxiliary Bishop for the Archdiocese of Boston (September 19, 1985). He left the Archdiocese of Boston to become Bishop of Green Bay on October 16, 1990.

### **Teacher**

In Green Bay, Bishop Banks took every opportunity to speak and to teach at diocesan gatherings and at parish events. He wrote a weekly column for the diocesan newspaper, *The Compass*. Though his early education was in the public school system, his conviction was that Catholic schools are the most effective instrument for instilling faith in the young. He sought ways to strengthen the Catholic elementary and secondary schools in the Diocese during a time of declining enrollment and difficult financing. He believed that some public assistance to parents who chose to send their children to other than public schools was a matter of justice. During his tenure as Bishop, Green Bay Catholic elementary schools continued to be consolidated and the support base of Catholic high schools was expanded. His love of and commitment to schools were made further evident when, after his retirement, he chose to reside in Holy Rosary Rectory in Kewaunee where he celebrated Mass for the school children and visited their classrooms.

With a licentiate in theology and a doctorate in canon law, Bishop Banks' applied his love of learning and theological education in the Diocese of Green Bay. The dramatic increase of lay ministry had created the need for programs to prepare these new ministers. Bishop Banks was particularly supportive of the diocesan lay ministry formation program that was conducted in cooperation with Silver Lake College; it was the first such program to be accredited in the

United States. He also endorsed the Master of Theology program at St. Norbert College. He also took a personal interest in the formation program for permanent deacons.

On the national level, Bishop Banks was a member of the Committee on Education of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops from 1990-1993 and served as its chair from 1993-1996. From 1996-1999, he served as the Treasurer of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. He also served as Chair of the National Catholic Education Association from 1998-2002. He was a member of the Board of Trustees for the Catholic University of America. On the international scene, he served on the Holy See's Permanent Interdicasterial Commission for the Distribution of Priests. He also visited Cuba twice in support of the Church there. Once it was as part of Pope John Paul II's visit to Cuba. The second visit was as part of the episcopal leadership of America in a meeting with the Cuban bishops.

### **Pastor**

The bishop's fundamental task is to be pastor to the people he serves. Bishop Banks recognized this. When he arrived in Green Bay, he said, "The most important thing a bishop does is become one with his people." His desire to know and become one with the people of Green Bay was obvious as he traveled the Diocese to meet parishioners throughout the 16 county region. Bishop Banks' previous experience as parish priest and pastor in Boston made him particularly aware of the critical importance of the parish and the priests who serve in them.

One of his first decisions as Bishop of Green Bay was to institute a substantial program for the episcopal visitation of parishes. Either he or his auxiliary, Bishop Robert Morneau, made a full-day's visit of each parish, meeting with the staff members and parish council, celebrating Mass, and holding a town hall meeting to hear the concerns of the parishioners. Visits to homebound parishioners and often to a local farm or industry were part of the visitation.

Bishop met with the priests who served the parishes at annual meetings in the 12 vicariates and at the annual Clergy Congress. With his encouragement, the priests of the Diocese, a few years after his arrival, entered into the demanding Emmaus program for priestly spiritual renewal. They also gave their full support when he called all the parishes of the Diocese to enter into *Renew*, a program of parish spiritual renewal, as a way to celebrate the Millennial Year, 2000. Bishop Banks was very supportive of priests and was always available to honor any request to speak with them privately and confidentially.

It was during his tenure that the revelation of the sexual abuse of young people by priests shocked the Church and the nation. Bishop Banks ensured that the Diocese cooperated fully with the directives developed by the national conference of bishops for the protection of children and young people and further strengthened the diocesan policies that were already in place for dealing with sex abuse cases. Special efforts were also made to respond to those who had been victims of such abuse. It was a difficult time.

Bishop Banks took a special interest in the pastoral care of the Hmong refugees and the Hispanic migrants who were arriving in northeast Wisconsin before and during his years as

bishop. He visited the migrant camps, celebrated liturgy for both the Hmong and Hispanics on their special occasions, and supported improvements in the pastoral ministry offered both populations.

The Bishop was also conscious of the importance of the Native American members of the Diocese, visiting their parishes and working to ensure their presence in the various areas of diocesan life. He also traveled to the Dominican Republic several times to visit the parishes where our priests served and whose work was supported by the Diocese of Green Bay.

Bishop Banks had a particular interest in the ecumenical movement. Soon after arriving in Green Bay he signed the Covenant between the Diocese and the ELCA Lutheran Synod and the Episcopal Diocese of Fond du Lac. During his years of service, he maintained a close and friendly relationship with the other Covenanting bishops. He was especially pleased to initiate a conference of Catholic priests and Lutheran ministers at St. Norbert College in celebration of the Catholic-Lutheran 1998 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.

The pastoral persona of Bishop Banks was evident in the way he dealt with people. He received complaints with understanding and he was quick to be present and show compassion to those who were hurting. Priests as well as laypeople came to know his compassion in his visits to the sick and when he presided at funeral liturgies.

As shepherd of the flock, Bishop Banks saw the importance of his role as celebrant and presider at Mass. His favorite liturgy was the Chrism Mass, celebrated on Tuesday of Holy Week. On that occasion, priests, deacons, and laypeople representing all the parishes of the Diocese gather at St. Francis Xavier Cathedral, “the Bishop’s Church,” for the Mass of the Blessing of the Holy Oils. It was a joy-filled liturgy, followed by a warm and friendly gathering for dinner at the Riverside Ballroom. Bishop Banks used to say that this was the Church of Green Bay at its best.

A pastoral highlight for Bishop Banks was the pilgrimage to Rome in 2000 to celebrate the Jubilee Year. Almost 300 pilgrims accompanied him for a week’s visit to the shrines of Rome and an audience with Pope John Paul II.

### **Administrator**

One of Bishop Banks’ eminent skills was administration. His responsibilities in Boston were principally in the area of administration, so the transition to the task of diocesan bishop took place smoothly. He worked well with the administrative organization and personnel who were in place. Any changes were carried out smoothly and with respect for what was already in place. The one change that Bishop Banks insisted on early in his tenure and in which he took most satisfaction was the policy requiring pension plans for all parish employees.

Early on there were also significant developments in the area of financial development. The annual Bishop’s Appeal was strengthened by the addition of the Crozier Society. Its membership increased over the years and became an important support for the work of the Diocese.

The Catholic Foundation was created in 1997. Led by a very involved lay board, it focused on raising endowments that soon totaled almost \$10 million dollars.

In an effort to provide more financial support for Catholic schools, Bishop Banks asked and received from the Presbyteral Council approval of a policy to require parishes that were not already involved in supporting a Catholic school to contribute a set amount per parishioner to a central fund for Catholic schools.

Good administration is as much an imperative for parishes as it is for the diocese. Bishop Banks arranged for closer oversight of the financial procedures and management of parishes. More attention was given to parish financial reports, and a program of visits to parishes by a member of the diocesan financial office was instituted. Standard personnel policies for parishes were given a significant update and then distributed to the parishes.

Building projects were carefully monitored by Bishop Banks. He chaired the meetings of the Consultors, a body of diocesan priests whose responsibility it is to review building projects. Bishop Banks' concern was that each project be widely supported by the parishioners, that the project be financially viable, and in the case of churches, that they be in accord with liturgical directives. Bishop Banks and the Consultors were busy during his time in office since a significant number of parishes built or renovated their churches.

There were two special projects in which Bishop Banks took special interest. The first was the building of Grellinger Hall, a residence for senior priests that is connected to and administered by the McCormick Memorial Home in Green Bay. The Bishop was intimately involved in eliciting the support of the priests for the project and in raising the necessary funds.

The second project was the renovation of Camp Tekawitha. On his pastoral visits to the children at the Camp during the summer, Bishop Banks became aware of the condition of the buildings and the need for a substantial renovation. He involved himself personally in raising the more than \$2 million necessary for the project and in approving the plans.

The major administrative and pastoral challenge for Bishop Banks and the whole Diocese was to carry through a major restructuring of the parishes which would enable the smaller number of priests to minister effectively to the people of the Diocese. From the beginning, Bishop Banks insisted that the planning had to begin at the local level. It was only after recommendations were put together by the priests and people of the parishes involved that they would be considered at the diocesan level and then be submitted for approval by the bishop.

The result was that many parishes would have to be merged and linked over the next several years. In some cases, it was decided that a parish had to be closed. This was always the most difficult decision, so Bishop Banks tried to help parishioners adjust to their loss by being present among them at a closing Mass and by making sure every effort was made to assist them in joining another or new parish.

Bishop Banks also turned to parish directors as a way to administer parishes without a priest. He increased the number of parish directors and supported them in their valuable ministry. Bishop Banks also took a great interest in recruiting candidates for the priestly ministry and in supporting the diocesan seminarians. He was not then in favor of recruiting priests from other countries because he felt that there was an even greater need in their own countries.

Bishop Banks had a long time interest in the permanent diaconate. He had been involved in developing the diaconate program in Boston, so he was pleased to find a strong program here. He took a personal interest in meeting the candidates for the diaconate and in supporting the deacons who were already involved in ministry.

Bishop Banks was also very appreciative of the tremendous contribution made to the Diocese by religious communities and their members. He spent considerable time working with St. Norbert College and Silver Lake College in response to Pope John Paul II's document on Catholic colleges, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. He also visited the Catholic hospitals and senior care institutions in the Diocese, meeting with their leadership and the chaplains. When he retired, he agreed to serve on the Board of Directors of the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity Health Care Ministry.

Bishop Banks met regularly with the leadership of the two women religious communities who have their motherhouse in the Diocese, the Sisters of St. Francis of the Holy Cross and the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. He also visited the convents of the other women religious and was present to celebrate the various jubilees of individual sisters. When he retired, he agreed to serve as chaplain to the New Genesis community. It was also his privilege to welcome the Discalced Carmelite Nuns to the Diocese and to dedicate their new monastery near Denmark, Wisconsin.

Following his official retirement late in 2003, he accepted positions as State Chaplain of the Catholic Daughters of the Americas and Faithful Friar of the Marquette Assembly of the Knights of Columbus. Along with these responsibilities, the retired bishop assisted with the celebration of Confirmation in parishes throughout the diocese and other diocesan events as they arise. With his doctorate in canon law, he also served as a synodal judge for the Diocesan marriage tribunal.

### ***Mens sana in corpore sano***

The responsibilities of a diocesan bishop are immense and they inevitably generate stress. Bishop Banks was aware that a healthy mind and body were essential for him to bear the burden of his office. The day after his installation as Bishop of Green Bay, he assembled his staff to inform them that he would be returning to Boston the next day for scheduled heart bypass surgery. That his heart needed this attention was a surprise to him as well as to his staff. Nonetheless, the experience put him on the alert. He recognized the need for regular exercise and relaxation. He began a daily walk before his workday began. He developed a liking for golf and acquired a certain skill at it. He also enjoys playing racquetball, and though the opportunities in land-locked Wisconsin are few, he enjoys windsurfing. As with his work, so with his sport, he enjoys a challenge and is competitive. In golf, the challenge came from his

auxiliary, Bishop Morneau, whom Bishop Banks could rarely match in skill. But he held his own in windsurfing. Bishop Morneau never left the dock.

Above all, Bishop Banks was convinced of the need of a spiritual base if he was to be a spiritual leader. He looked forward to his annual retreats. He was an avid reader. One's spirituality is personal and not on display, but one only needed to observe Bishop Banks at Mass to know that he was genuine. His Episcopal motto was *Blessed Be God Forever*.

Monsignor Paul P. Koszarek