

THE Catholic Spirit

THE OFFICIAL NEWSPAPER OF THE DIOCESE OF METUCHEN

MARCH 2, 2017 • SPECIAL ISSUE

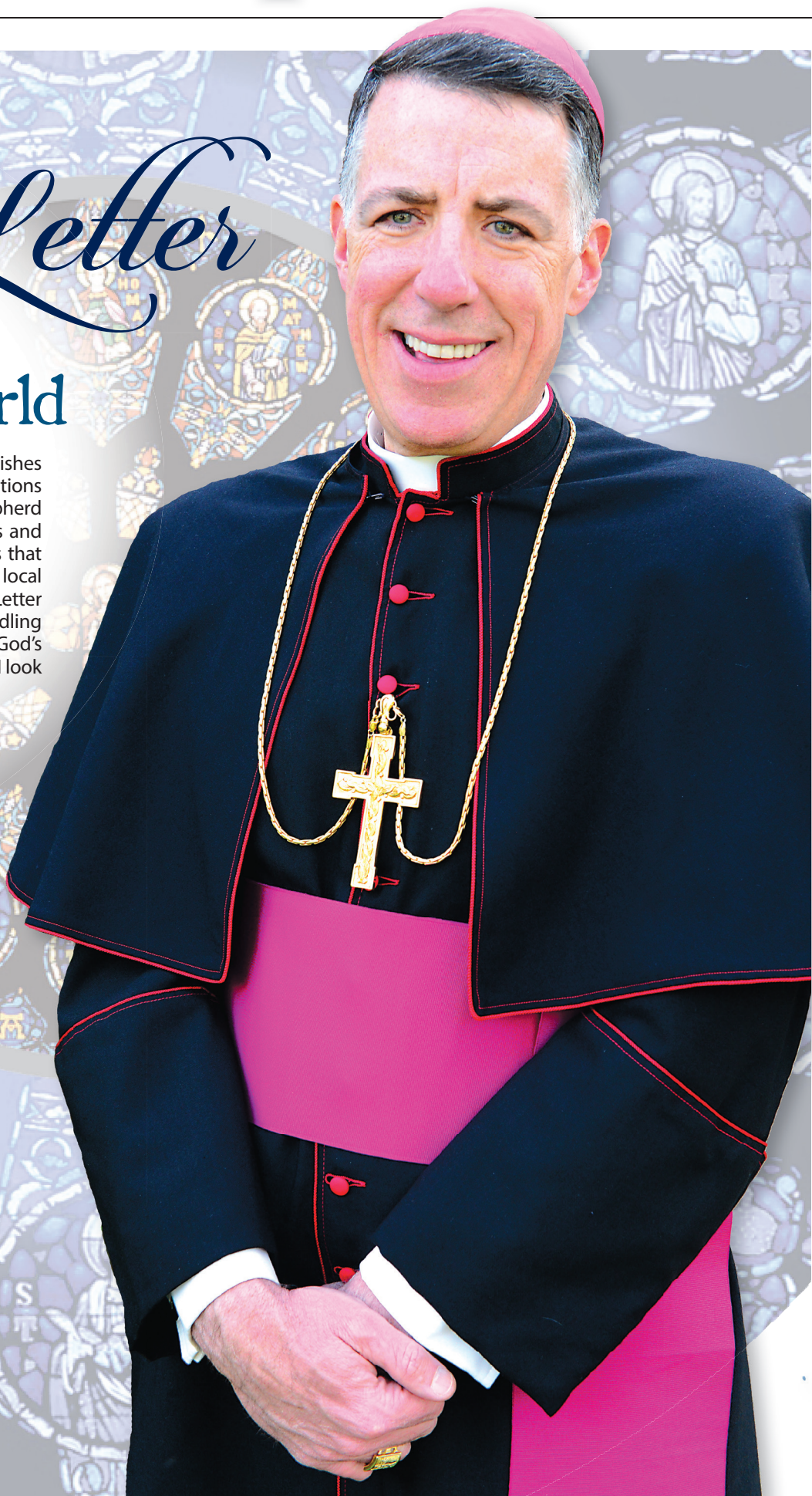


Pastoral Letter

Lighting a fire in the heart of our world

This Pastoral Letter is a reflection on my pastoral visits to all 90 parishes within our diocese as well as visits to many Catholic schools, institutions and varied ministries and ethnic groups since I became your Shepherd last May. Based on my many conversations with clergy, religious and lay faithful during these months, it shares with you the priorities that emerged and which call for our attention as we go forward in this local Church of Metuchen. It is my hope and prayer that this Pastoral Letter will inspire you through the grace of the Holy Spirit to become kindling so together we can "set a fire in the heart of our world," allowing God's love and power to burn more brightly here in Central New Jersey. I look forward to further conversations and planning with you.

This issue was mailed on Feb. 28
Your next issue will be March 9



Getting to know you . . .

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It has been nine months since I was ordained and installed as your bishop. Approaching the first anniversary of that event on May 3, I already have profound feelings of gratitude and joy for the people whose spiritual care God has entrusted to me. I certainly feel humbled, yet blessed to serve here as your bishop. I have found our diocese to be a wonderful place where God is loved and living and working in some amazing ways.

I have also found it to be a place where I have been inspired to deepen my own friendship with Jesus through prayer and worship, as well as in my call to be the best spiritual father possible to you in this local Church of Metuchen.

My first priority has been to get to know the diocese better: its parishes and institutions but most of all the laity, religious, deacons, and priests. From the first day I arrived, I began visiting our 90 parishes. I have been to each of them at least once. At each parish, I



Bishop James F. Checchio, the fifth shepherd of the diocese, prays before Mass at St. John Paul II Parish, St. Stephen worship site, Perth Amboy.

— *The Catholic Spirit* file photo

have celebrated Mass and often enjoyed a reception afterwards. Your hospitality, enthusiasm and most of all your witnessing to the faith have been so inspiring to me over these past months. I am deeply grateful for your welcome and openness.

On many special occasions, I have taken the opportunity to get to know you. It has been a joy attending the cultural celebrations of some of our ethnic communities and visiting with members of many groups and organizations, such as the Knights of Columbus, pastoral musicians, youth groups, scouts, and respect for life organizations.

One experience I will never forget is our diocesan pilgrimage this past November to the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. It was a profound experience to be able to join with almost 4,000 of you! What a beautiful and important moment it was for me to pray with so many members of our diocesan family, who responded to a call to celebrate together the conclusion of the Year of Mercy and the 35th anniversary of the founding of the diocese.

It has been inspiring to become acquainted with the many women and men who dynamically and intentionally serve our local Church. We are fortunate to have many permanent deacons, who so generously take on the vital witness of service in so many of our parishes. Recently, I gathered with them and their wives for prayer, discussion, and fellowship. We are blessed with many dedicated women religious with whom I have enjoyed prayer, discussion and a meal. On numerous occasions, I have met with our seminarians here in the diocese and at two of the three seminaries where they study. Our youth, too, are so important to our diocese and it has been energizing to visit our four Catholic high schools on multiple occasions as well as many of our elementary schools. I have met the students at the Catholic Center at Rutgers and have been to all of our Catholic Charities centers and shelters, our diocesan sponsored Catholic hospital, and two local prisons. In addition, I have met with the department heads of our pastoral and formation offices in the St. John Neumann Pastoral Center in order to gain deeper insight into the various work and needs that they address in our diocese. It is encouraging to see the Gospel in action in all of these places and through all of these necessary ministries.

I have learned that we have in our diocese a rich blessing of a growing Hispanic population; it has been a delight to get to know them. This community presents us with the opportunity to be enriched by their many cultures and rich faith, but also presents the challenge of

ministering effectively to their needs, especially to the needs of new immigrants. It is my great desire that our brothers and sisters of this community feel equally “at home” in the life of the diocese, our parishes, schools and various ministries, as every other Catholic living and worshipping here does, and that we all join together in our commitment to live the Gospel and build up our local Church.

While this pastoral letter is indeed directed to all the faithful of the Diocese of Metuchen, I am also aware of the particular needs and challenges faced by the immigrants who recently have arrived in our country. Together, we will determine a course of action to address their specific pastoral needs now and in the future. It indeed is a joy to find their enthusiasm for our faith and their willingness to be involved in every aspect of the life of the Church.

They, indeed, are very much needed in our local Church.

Among the encounters most important to me have been with the priests of the diocese. They are my principal collaborators, extending my ministry as bishop to all of you. Our priests spend their days and nights thinking about, praying for, rejoicing in, worrying about and working on behalf of the life of the Church in our diocese. It is evident to me that they love the people of our diocese very much, and they gladly give their lives for your well-being. I have met and prayed with them individually and in groups: at their rectory offices, deanery meetings, the priest convocation and during an Advent day of reflection. I recognize the burdens that they carry and I commit myself to being close to them in my daily prayer and assisting them in whatever way I can to shepherd them, so they may better take care of themselves and all of you. I am confident that our priests are among our greatest resources in this diocese.

What a wonderful year it has been!

Getting to meet and speak with so many of you has helped me to understand better who you are and the joys and challenges you face being a Catholic in Central New Jersey in 2017. Moreover, my encounters with all of you have provided me with an initial vivid picture of the many pastoral needs and great opportunities for our local Church. I want to assure you that my pastoral visits have served as the substance of much of my personal daily prayer. You are in my heart!

At this time, as we head into a new year, I feel called to share with you the pastoral priorities that I believe must guide our movement forward. I have discerned these priorities not as an exhaustive list, but as a practical way to set a pathway for us to travel together. I am confident that if we set out in mutual trust and good will, in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ will continue to accomplish great things in the Diocese of Metuchen.

Be kindling

I was fascinated to learn when I arrived, that the name Metuchen comes from the language of the Lenni Lenape Native Americans. It means firewood. Apparently there was a rich supply of dry firewood in the region. (This is the reason for the image of a flame in the upper left quadrant of our diocesan coat of arms.) In offering this pastoral letter my desire is to call every Catholic in the Church of Metuchen to be, in a sense, firewood. As your chief shepherd, my responsibility is to call you, to be materially and spiritually ready for God to set us on fire with faith, hope and love.

In his apostolic letter *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis has told us, “We strive to light a fire in the heart of the world” (n. 271). As your bishop and your fellow

Continued on next page

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Serving the Catholic community in Middlesex, Somerset, Hunterdon and Warren Counties

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Subscription and advertising deadlines: Tuesday, 1 p.m.

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The Catholic Spirit is a member of the Catholic Press Association and the New Jersey Catholic Advertising Network

The Catholic Spirit (U.S.P.S.#14-804) is published every other week, by the Roman Catholic Church, Diocese of Metuchen, 146 Metlars Lane, Piscataway, NJ 08854. Subscription price is \$30 per year. Periodicals postage paid at Philadelphia, PA and additional mailing office.

POSTMASTER: Send change of address notice to *The Catholic Spirit*, 146 Metlars Lane, Piscataway, NJ 08854.

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Catholic, I am inviting and counting on you to light a fire with me in the heart of our part of the world. I want us — the laity, religious, deacons, and priests of the Diocese of Metuchen — to be kindling that is set aflame by the Holy Spirit, allowing God's love and power to burn more brightly here in Central New Jersey.

Where do we begin?

Each of us, as Catholic Christians, has received a message. Those who gave it to us received it from others before them, and so on, back through the generations and across a vast geography. It is a message that has always been vitally important to the people of God. In fact, the first Christians were convinced that the message was so crucial that it simply had to be told to others, regardless if telling it meant paying a great personal cost, often times even death. They were responding to Jesus' great Commission, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations" (*Mt 28:19*). Christians throughout the ages have responded to this call with great enthusiasm. Now, it is our time. You and I have the great privilege to make the message known and to give what we have received.

What is this message? What makes it so important? As you know already, it is the Good News of Jesus Christ. However, in the age that we live, so marked by empty secular promises to human happiness, we must ponder the essential message anew. Who is Jesus? Why did He come? What does it matter? Are we truly responding with our "all" to what He offers us?

Jesus, a real person who lived in the Middle East 2,000 years ago, was and is God in human flesh. As we say in the Creed every Sunday, He is "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God." As such, Jesus is the concrete expression of God's desire to join in every aspect of our lives. He is God's wisdom and compassion made manifest in the flesh. He is God's comfort and defense of the poor and marginalized. By His example and His teaching, He reveals to us who God is and who we are. Jesus Christ is all of these things for us, precisely because He is the Savior of the world.

Our world is a wounded place. It is not necessary to be a sociologist or a theologian to see human brokenness in society, communities, families and especially in ourselves. The human condition is marked by weakness, sin, selfishness, vanity, suffering and death. In addition, our hearts have hungers that all the people and things in the world will not completely satisfy. Ultimately, we cannot be our own doctor. The world needs a Savior. Into the chaos of the human condition, God sent His beloved, only begotten Son, Jesus. By His suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus breaks the power of sin, and He offers His followers divine life and true communion with God and one another. In Jesus, even death itself is no longer a curse, but a transformation that leads to utterly satisfying Life and infinite Love: Eternal Life! "I came that they might have life, and have it to the full!" (*Jn 10:10*).

The Church that Jesus founded makes it possible, even now, to live that abundant life. The privileged place to encounter Him is through the Church. It is through the Sacred Scripture, the sacraments and the sure guidance of the apostolic teachings that Jesus continues to richly provide for us. These are the means that Jesus has willed so that we may encounter Him, and in doing so, that we may respond by becoming His disciples and living a new life in Him.

As Pope Francis writes, "The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept His offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness" (*The Joy of the Gospel*, n. 1). In a word, Jesus is, for the Catholic Christian, the pearl of great price! (*Mt 13:45*).

And He is for everyone. As you know well, we live in a world that is marked by a great and wonderful di-



At the altar from left, Msgr. Robert J. Zamorski, Bishop James F. Checchio, Archbishop Christophe Pierre, Msgr. William Benwell and priests from the diocese are shown during the consecration at Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Washington, D.C. The Mass was celebrated during the Nov. 19 pilgrimage to celebrate the founding of the diocese in 1981. Right, Bishop Checchio administers the sacrament of reconciliation at the Marian shrine.

versity of ethnicities, cultures, languages and religions. Here in the Diocese of Metuchen this diversity is clear for all to see, and I have found it to be remarkably rich. While we are called to respect and honor the goodness found in the cultural and religious diversity around us, we must never grow tired or ashamed to propose the unique joy of the Gospel and the abundant life Jesus came to bring (*Jn 10:10*). Christians in every age are called to be "Salt and Light." Therefore, we must resist the temptation to a kind of relativism that would make Christ simply a great moral teacher, one of many religious voices. He died and rose for all people. His Good News is for everyone. Believing in Him not only enriches every life, but puts us into direct relationship with God the Father as adopted children and heirs to everlasting life.

This is the wonderful message entrusted to the Church: "How then can they call upon Him whom they have not believed? How shall they believe if they have not heard? How shall they hear unless someone is sent?" (*Rom 10:14*). Blessed Pope Paul VI incisively pointed out in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14 that, "Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity." This ministry of sharing Him and His Good News, that we call evangelization, must then be the central priority of the work of our local Church, lest we miss our designated moment in salvation history.

A duty rooted in Baptism

In my life as a priest and now as a bishop, I have often thought of and reflected upon the stirring words of St.

Bishop Checchio gives the homily at Mass at St. Magdalen de Pazzi Church, Flemington, May 7. The Mass was the first celebrated by the bishop in a parish in the diocese after his Mass of ordination and installation at Church of the Sacred Heart, South Plainfield, May 3. Bishop Checchio returned to the parish May 29 to attend a reception for newly-ordained Father Mauricio Tabera-Vasquez.
—The Catholic Spirit file photos



Pope John Paul II: "I sense that the moment has come to commit all of the Church's energies to a new evangelization and to the mission ad gentes [to all peoples]. No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples" (*Redemptoris Missio*, n. 3). As you know, St. John Paul did more than talk about it; he poured himself out in his tireless efforts to bring the Good News of Jesus to the ends of the earth. He remains an extraordinary example of a loving and faithful evangelizer and how blessed we are to have benefitted from his example and sacred ministry. I believe that we, too, are now at this moment in our local Church. The time is ripe for a renewal!

But we must be clear. The work of evangelization is not entrusted solely to popes and bishops. Nor is this work restricted to priests and religious — far from it. God's Church on earth has not flourished through the evangelizing efforts of just a few, but by all of its members living and sharing their faith day in and day out, year by year, century by century. It first of all is

Continued on next page



Continued from previous page
not carried out through ambitious pastoral programs and well-staffed institutions. The work of evangelization begins with a transformed heart willing to share what Christ has done for him or her. This is done most effectively by way of ordinary Catholics living and interacting with their family, friends, co-workers, and the rest of society.

That is because evangelization is not a call rooted exclusively in priestly ordination or religious profession — it is rooted in Baptism! The Holy Spirit who comes upon us in Baptism is the same Spirit who came upon the disciples at the first Pentecost, giving birth to the Church. The Holy Spirit sent them into the world to proclaim the wonderful works God had accomplished in Christ. The Spirit still sends each baptized person into the world to witness to Jesus and build up His Body, the Church. We believe that the Holy Spirit equips us through baptism and confirmation with supernatural gifts that are called charisms (I Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:7-18). The word charism comes from a



Greek word, which means “gift.”

Our diocese is filled with countless charisms in each of you that will enable us to make Jesus more known and loved. The Holy Spirit has come alive for me in a new way throughout these months as I have been blessed to confirm so many of our youth with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. I am anxious for all to experience and see this same movement of the Holy Spirit gently blowing across our diocese. Indeed, if we are to live our Christian lives to the full, we must have a renewed appreciation for, and relationship with, the Holy Spirit. I ask you to join me in praying that the charisms of the Holy Spirit will flood our Church and set on fire the soul of each believer.

What is our vocation in the world?

The role of a Christian in the world is explained beautifully in a second century document, the “Letter to Diognetus,” which gives us some powerful insights into our common vocation:

“Christians are indistinguishable from other people either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life.... With regard to dress, food and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is

Left, Bishop James F. Checchio consecrates the bread and wine at Mass during the Catechetical Conference at the St. John Neumann Pastoral Center chapel, Piscataway, Oct. 1. Below, Bishop Checchio leads adoration of the Blessed Sacrament in the Pastoral Center chapel at the 15th annual Critical Life Issues Conference Oct. 29. Bottom of page, Bishop Checchio poses with deacons from the diocese and their wives after Mass at the Cathedral of St. Francis of Assisi, Metuchen, Aug. 13.

Greek or foreign. And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives.... We may say that the Christian is to the world what the soul is to the body.”

Lay women and men of the Diocese of Metuchen: You are the spirit of Christ dwelling and acting in Central New Jersey and the world needs you! This is our “mission field.” Our neighborhoods and schools, our hospitals and social agencies — everywhere that you go should be effected by the faith and Christian values you carry in your hearts. There are several ways we can do this. This will vary depending on the circumstances and our state of life. However, we will have nothing to offer the world, unless we ourselves have been transformed by Jesus. In the words of a famous philosophical principle: “We cannot give, what we do not have.” Therefore, the first place to begin any process of renewal is always on a personal level.

How do we begin? We must first resolve to put Jesus in the center of our life. This has become a constant refrain of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, who recently shared in a homily during this past Christmas season that, “Jesus Christ manifested Himself; we are invited to get to know Him, to recognize Him in our lives and in so many circumstances of life.” Hence, the Holy Father said, we all must ask ourselves the question: “Is Jesus Christ at the center of my life? And what is my relationship with Jesus Christ?”

The first and primary way to get to know Jesus is through prayer. The Holy Spirit dwelling within each of us, prays for us (cf. Romans 8:26-27). The Sacred Scriptures constantly reintroduce us to Him. Learning to dedicate daily time to reflect and pray with the Scriptures is essential to developing a friendship with Jesus. I encourage the ancient practice known as Lectio Divina, which is a meditative, receptive way for our soul to interact with the Word of God.

Regardless of our method, genuine renewal and nourishment of our Christian life requires prioritizing some dedicated time to lift our heart and mind to God. Prayer removes from our hearts the other things we adore and that capture our interest which can detract from our friendship with Him. Prayer reveals to us our sins and attachments, and shows us His mercy and love. The Scriptures repeatedly attest that when Jesus calls a disciple, it is always accompanied by an invitation to a life of intimacy with Him (John 1:38-39). That intimacy can only be nurtured by a life of prayer. This intimacy with Him will then influence every aspect of our lives. In other words, when people meet us, they should discover His presence in us.

What are the ways we are called to witness?

Our baptismal mission to evangelize the world will primarily arise from our relationship with, and dedication to, Jesus. Sometimes it will mean giving explicit witness to Jesus — His love, His friendship, His salvation and His Church — through our words: “Always be prepared to give a reason to anyone who asks you for the hope that you

have” (*1Pt 3:15*). Our witness however, should never be an imposition. Nothing can ensure the failure of our message like a stubborn attempt to force it where it is not welcome. In a word, our lives should be attractive to others. Holiness of life is the fascination that will invite others to want to discover what we have found. A wise adage has it this way: “Evangelization is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread!”

Sometimes our evangelizing will mean giving witness to values that are important not only to Christian faith, but to all authentic human living. Blessed Pope Paul VI once famously observed in his address to the United Nations that, “the Church is an expert in humanity.” A good portion of our diocese is situated in one of the most densely populated and most urban regions of our country. While this locale creates so many opportunities, it also exacerbates the weakness of our culture marked by anonymity, individualism, and hyper-efficiency. In a setting like ours, acts of kindness, patience, compassion, and love can be like a breath of oxygen to a drowning person. Our first call is to be present to the dignity of another human person. Where else would the “revolution of tenderness,” for which Pope Francis has called, be more needed and more welcomed?

Still, at other times, our evangelizing will be more systemic. The Gospel call to justice requires us working to ensure our civil laws, our economy and our culture become more reflective of the goods necessary for human fulfillment and flourishing. We can be justly proud of the long tradition of Catholic social teaching, which consistently has lifted up the dignity of the human person, made in God’s image and likeness with an eternal destiny. As Catholics, we have much to contribute to our national discussion on what it means to be a just and free society. Let us rededicate ourselves to knowing well what our Church teaches in this regard and why. In this way, we will be prepared to be a wonderful witness to Christ in addressing the problems of the modern world.

Much of this evangelizing work that I describe here, will be accomplished much more effectively by the laity of the Diocese of Metuchen; far more so than I can do as your bishop. My task as your bishop, as St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, is “to equip the saints for the work of ministry” (*Eph 4:12*). Pope Francis describes our mission well in *The Joy of the Gospel*. I offer here two passages and invite you to read them over thoughtfully — perhaps even make them the subject of a prayerful mediation:

“Today, as the Church seeks to experience a profound missionary renewal, there is a kind of preaching which falls to each of us as a daily responsibility. It has to do with bringing the Gospel to the people we meet, whether they be our neighbors or complete strangers. This is the informal preaching which takes place in the middle of a conversation, something along the lines of what a missionary does when visiting a home. Being a disciple means being con-



Above, Bishop James F. Checchio poses with clergy from the diocese after Mass at St. Catharine Church, Spring Lake, at the annual Priest Convocation Oct. 25-27. Right, during a meeting of representatives from the diocese at Evening Prayer and Blessing of the Pontifical Insignia at the Cathedral of St. Francis of Assisi, Metuchen, May 2, Bishop-elect Checchio greets Siena Albanese, a member of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish, Three Bridges. Siena represented all of the children in faith formation classes.

— **The Catholic Spirit file photos**

stantly ready to bring the love of Jesus to others, and this can happen unexpectedly and in any place: on the street, in a city square, during work, on a journey (n. 127).”

“The primary reason for evangelizing is the love of Jesus which we have received, the experience of salvation which urges us to ever greater love of Him. What kind of love would not feel the need to speak of the beloved, to point Him out, to make Him known? If we do not feel an intense desire to share this love, we need to pray insistently that He will once more touch our hearts. We need to implore His grace daily, asking Him to open our cold hearts and shake up our lukewarm and superficial existence (n. 264).”

What is my call to our diocese?

In light of all of that I have reflected on above, responding to the appeal of Pope Francis, and in fidelity to the example and teaching of the great Christian martyrs, saints, and popes of the past two millennia, I urge every Catholic in our diocese, clergy, religious and laity, young or old, everyone of us, to set out anew by committing to deepening



your friendship with Jesus. Before all other pastoral initiatives, prayer must be our main priority in this diocese, so that fruitful evangelization can be recognized as a uniquely central pastoral priority in the Diocese of Metuchen.

In our renewed prayer efforts, intercession for a New Evangelization must accompany every pastoral initiative. There will be no renewal in our diocese without begging the Holy Spirit to pour out once again those graces that were

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Ultimately, Jesus is answer to most perplexing questions of human heart



Above, Bishop James F. Checchio poses with John and Janice Bryson, members of St. Bernard of Clairvaux Parish, Bridgewater, who were celebrating their 25th anniversary, and their family, after the Silver and Gold wedding anniversary evening prayer service Oct. 30. Marriage and family life are among the five priorities the bishop has set for the diocese. Left, the bishop presents the Disciple of Mercy award to Eileen Fisher, one of the diocesan recipients, during a prayer service Nov. 20.

— *The Catholic Spirit* file photos

marriage support programs to be strong and effective — with our diocesan efforts supporting and empowering our parishes to be vibrant centers of marriage and family life. I want our youth ministry and education programs to offer effective assistance to parents striving to raise healthy and holy children. Most of all, I call upon our families to embrace and to give witness to the joy of love that they experience in faithful Catholic family life. Attractive family life is the most effective way to evangelize the culture.

I am well aware that no family is perfect. The struggles of life often tarnish, and can even seem to destroy, the joy that God intends us to experience in our marriages and family life. It is critical, therefore, that we include the Gospel message of mercy and healing in all such ministry we undertake. I want all people, including those who have experienced the heartbreak of divorce, to know, through the Church, the welcome and the healing of Jesus.

Catholic education and catechesis

In the Diocese of Metuchen, faith formation has been a high priority and we are blessed to have four Catholic high schools and 24 Catholic elementary schools that educate and form our young people. In addition, every parish offers religious education programs for young people who are not enrolled in a Catholic school. In our diocese, thousands of people spend great amounts of energy, time, and money administering, supporting, and improving these programs and institutions year after year. To me, evangelization clarifies in a dramatic way the nature and purpose of all that work.

Of course, it is true that we need academic excellence, effective teaching techniques, the newest technology, and attractive, well-maintained physical plants. But all of these things, and so many other areas that we spend our days attending to, in the end, are at the service of evangelizing our young people and inviting them into the life of discipleship.

When it is at its best, all education leads people to ask the great questions of life; it fires in us a desire to know why we are here and for what purpose. What is distinctive about Catholic education is that it knows

an essential part of the answer to those questions. Ultimately, Jesus Christ is the answer to the most perplexing questions of the human heart. Catholic education should educate our young people to be truly free, intellectually honest and dynamically prepared to engage the wider culture with confidence. As we continue to provide Catholic education and faith formation, we not only are evangelizing; rather, we are forming the next generation of evangelizers. If we do not have this in mind as we teach, administer, maintain and develop our schools and educational programs, then we have “missed the boat.”

The dignity of the human person

The dignity and value of every human person is at the heart of the Good News. This requires that a key aspect of our work of evangelization is to embrace, live and share “the Gospel of fraternity and justice” (*The Joy of the Gospel*, n. 179).

In American society today, that means standing up to defend and protect the dignity of the unborn by working and praying against abortion, providing real help and encouragement to mothers in difficult situations, and supporting policies and programs that do the same. It means standing up and working for the elderly, the disabled, and the sick. We must see that the rhetoric surrounding assisted suicide and euthanasia is a counterfeit and misguided notion of compassion that must be rejected. We must be willing to work for justice for immigrants and refugees who flee desperation and violence in their homelands. We must never grow indifferent to the plight of the hopeless caught in the destructive cycle of addictions, which scourge our modern society. And it means standing up and working for people living in poverty, struggling for food and shelter in the midst of a world of wealth and abundance. We must never forget that the Gospel of Jesus hauntingly reminds us “Whatever you do to the least of my people, you do to me” (*Mt 25:40*).

This kind of prophetic work has both personal and political elements. For this reason, it is important, even essential, to witness to the sacredness of all human life and support the weakest among us through our words and personal choices; but it is not enough. We must work to make sure that our laws, our policies, our economy and our culture grow more just and more protective of every human life, from conception to natural death, and of the environment that supports it.

At present, our American political system is guided by two major political parties. It should be clear to any Catholic who is informed by the Church’s teachings that both of them, at times, fail in serious ways to respect and protect human dignity in their positions and platforms. Too often, we allow ourselves to be Democrats or Republicans first, and Catholic second. That way of prioritizing our values and forming our conscience is a scourge upon authentic Catholic living. With some of the policies and platforms that have been adopted, it can be difficult for Catholics to choose a party and to be comfortable in it. While everyone is free to be a member of the political party of their choice, our primary political responsibility requires of us that we should work to form — and criticize where necessary — the stances of these parties that are inconsistent with Catholic social teaching. Indeed, sometimes criticism of one’s own party is more effective than criticism of the “other” one.

Liturgy

Also closely tied to the Church’s ministry of evangelization is her liturgical life. In the liturgy, the people of God receive the Good News in word and sacrament and are then sent out to share it. As Pope Francis has written, “Evangelization with joy becomes beauty in the liturgy, as part of our daily concern to spread goodness.

Continued on next page

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poured out on that first Pentecost. We must personally and communally expect, yearn and pray for a New Pentecost in our midst.

Of course, the work of the Church includes many ministries and institutions, and by calling us all to make evangelization a priority, I do not at all intend to “sideline” these other important works. On the contrary, in one way or another they are each an expression of the Church’s evangelizing mission. Here are five aspects of the life and ministry of our diocese, to which I would like to draw particular attention, which we must view through the lens of Evangelization.

Marriage and family life

One topic that is close to the heart of Pope Francis and high on his list of pastoral priorities is marriage and the family (and like evangelization, this topic, too, was dear to Pope St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI). Pope Francis called not one, but two major meetings of the international Synod of Bishops to address it at the Vatican. He summarized the results of those meetings in his apostolic letter, *The Joy of Love*. The Holy Father is well aware that the joy of love that we experience in marriage and family life is completely tied up with the joy of the Gospel that we are called to live and give witness to in the world. The family, he writes, is “where we learn to live with others despite our differences and to belong to one another; it is also the place where parents pass on the faith to their children” (*The Joy of the Gospel*, n. 66).

In the name of both the joy of love and the joy of the Gospel, I am committed to working with you to support, strengthen, and protect marriage and family life in our diocese. I want our marriage preparation and

young (and sometimes not so young) men from all over our country and in all the different seminaries of our country who desire to lay down their lives in service to the Church as priests in our day. I am certain that many more young men in our diocese have the natural capabilities and supernatural gifts to become priests. I also know that the dominant culture of our day makes it increasingly difficult to hear and respond to that call. However, God is indeed calling forth men to continue to lead us in the ministerial priesthood. Our job is to pray unceasingly for the Lord of the harvest to send more workers into the vineyard.

I want to thank and encourage our clergy, parish liturgy committees and parish liturgical ministers for their ongoing efforts to prepare and celebrate the Mass and other liturgical events in ways that are beautiful, inspiring, and worthy of our worship of God. Amongst others, the choirs who lead us in singing, the altar servers who help the priests and deacons, the lectors who proclaim God's Word, and the clergy who lead our prayer all play important parts in this. However, we must always be reminded of the centrality of our worship and the great care that must constantly accompany the celebration of sacred mysteries.

I want to pause here for a word on the importance of preaching in the liturgy. I repeat the striking words of Pope Francis: "We know that the faithful attach great importance to [the homily], and that both they and their ordained ministers suffer because of homilies: the laity from having to listen to them and the clergy from having to preach them! It is sad that this is the case. The homily can actually be an intense and happy experience of the Spirit, a consoling encounter with God's word, a constant source of renewal and growth" (*The Joy of the Gospel*, n. 135). In light of this, I urge our priests and deacons — and I challenge myself as well — to redouble our efforts to craft homilies that are born from our own prayer, study and authentic engagement with the Word of God. In this way, we will nourish and challenge the people we serve. Our Sunday homily preparation should figure prominently in our weekly pastoral priorities.

The Second Vatican Council instructed us that "active participation" in the liturgy was critical to an authentic celebration of the Christian mysteries. In order for our liturgies to be all that they are meant to be, we all must cultivate an interior disposition of worship, where we bring our hearts to God in adoration and praise. Only God is worthy of our adoration. Our faithful participation in Sunday Mass will help cleanse us of false idols and preoccupations with self-interests. A practical way to increase our devotion to the liturgy is to seek to understand it better. When we come to understand what happens at Mass, and the deep meaning in the symbolic ritual actions, our hearts are warmed to the reality that we celebrate. I encourage all of our faithful to commit to learning about and loving the Sacred Liturgy. Participate in parish and diocesan programs designed to increase knowledge and love of the liturgy, read a good book, or download a good liturgical app or podcast and discuss what you learn with others. Faithful and beautifully celebrated liturgies will bring great honor to God and propel our local Church into a vibrant mission field of evangelization: "Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord!"

Vocations

A commitment to evangelization demands a commitment to the development and support of ecclesial vocations, especially vocations to the priesthood. Our priests provide the people of God with essential nourishment and dynamic leadership in our efforts to proclaim the message of salvation, calling all people into communion with the Church as disciples.

As you may know, for the 10 years prior to my arrival in Metuchen, I served as rector of the Pontifical North American College, the seminary for American seminarians studying in Rome and the house for U.S. priests engaged in graduate studies or on sabbatical in Rome. During that time, I was consistently impressed and encouraged by the faith and the boldness of the

young (and sometimes not so young) men from all over our country and in all the different seminaries of our country who desire to lay down their lives in service to the Church as priests in our day. I am certain that many more young men in our diocese have the natural capabilities and supernatural gifts to become priests. I also know that the dominant culture of our day makes it increasingly difficult to hear and respond to that call. However, God is indeed calling forth men to continue to lead us in the ministerial priesthood. Our job is to pray unceasingly for the Lord of the harvest to send more workers into the vineyard.

In order for the Church to be radically herself, we desperately need the witness of our consecrated women and men religious. In past generations, evangelization happened largely through the religious women and men who gave witness to Jesus through the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. They happily gave their lives in service for very little earthly reward. Whether we realized it or not, it was through the efforts of the armies of sisters and brothers who taught in our schools that have formed generations of faithful Catholics. Today, we are blessed to still have some religious teaching in schools, but the number is small compared to what it was years ago.

Still, our Church needs this witness of consecrated religious in order for us to see another example of the radical beauty of life given over to the joy of the Gospel in this vocation. We need more consecrated religious in our diocese to fortify and strengthen our evangelical call to renewal. The renewal of the Church in every age has always depended on saints who saw the signs of their times and responded with generosity. Religious life has always carried with it the seeds of renewal. I want us to work and pray for the renewal of religious life in our diocese and encourage the generous call of our young people, especially young women, to see a heroic opportunity to serve Jesus and His Church with an undivided heart in this way.

Since our diocese was founded, the permanent deacons have exercised their servant leadership in our local Church. This is one vocation where, gratefully, the Lord's call seems to be heard more readily. Today, we have more than 175 permanent deacons who serve our 90 parishes. Additionally, permanent deacons also can be found assisting the poor and imprisoned, visiting the sick and homebound, and teaching and ministering in various apostolates throughout the diocese. Eighteen men are in our diaconate formation program right now and we are just putting together our first class

At right, after being ordained, Father Roy Quesea gives his first blessing to Bishop James F. Checchio. The bishop ordained Father Quesea, Father Mauricio Tabera-Vasquez and Father Mhonchan Ezung at Mass at the Cathedral of St. Francis of Assisi, May 28. Below, Bishop Checchio poses with the seminarians of the diocese. During his tenure as rector of the North American Pontifical College in Rome, Bishop Checchio is credited with shepherding 490 of his students into the priesthood.

— *Catholic Spirit* file photos

to be taught in Spanish, which will prepare future deacons to effectively minister to our growing Hispanic community. The configuration of these men to Christ the Servant provides a reminder to us all of our need to imitate He who came to serve and not be served. Our permanent deacons have an important role in our parishes and society, bridging the gap in evangelization efforts in our parishes, homes, neighborhoods and in the workplace. Please pray that more good men will respond to this call, too.

As Bishop of Metuchen, I will work hard to foster a culture of vocational awareness in our diocese; however, I cannot accomplish this alone. Your help is critical. We must together foster an environment where we are all sensitive to the actions of God in our lives. By promoting discernment as an ordinary and necessary part of every disciple's life, we will create a rich atmosphere for the Holy Spirit to move hearts. If we all are asking the question, "What does God want of me?" we will help counteract the stifling noise of the culture that seeks only personal fulfillment. The Christian life is characterized by generosity, sacrifice and commitment. Vocations to the priesthood, diaconate and religious life are borne from such environments.

I ask young people to consider serving the Church as a priest or religious. I ask older adults, especially parents and grandparents, to invite the young men and women in their own lives and families to explore such possibilities and to faithfully, joyfully live their own vocations. I have been told over and over again by priests and seminarians that the witness, example and encouragement of grandparents was a great impetus for many of them to enter the seminary. Together, our fidelity will bring greater credibility and attractiveness to our witness to the joy of the Gospel.

Continued on next page



Getting to know you...

Below is a list of the parishes in the Diocese of Metuchen and the date on which Bishop James F. Checchio made his first visit to them. At some parishes the bishop celebrated a deanery Mass, at others a regularly scheduled weekday or Sunday Mass. He confirmed young people, presided at prayer services and joined in the Sesquicentennial Celebration at St. Joseph Parish, Hillsborough.

May 7	St. Magdalen de Pazzi, Flemington	Aug. 28	St. Joseph, Raritan
May 8	Cathedral of St. Francis of Assisi, Metuchen	Aug. 28	St. Ann, Raritan
May 10	Our Lady of Mount Virgin, Middlesex	Sept. 3	Saint Philip & Saint James, Phillipsburg
May 11	St. Mary, Alpha	Sept. 4	St. Mary of Czestochowa, Bound Brook
May 12	St. Helena, Edison	Sept. 4	St. Frances Cabrini, Piscataway
May 17	St. Bartholomew, East Brunswick	Sept. 25	Our Lady of Peace, North Brunswick
May 19	Blessed Sacrament, Martinsville	Sept. 25	Queenship of Mary Parish, Plainsboro
May 20	St. Thomas the Apostle, Old Bridge	Sept. 29	St. Andrew, Avenel
May 21	St. John the Evangelist, Lambertville	Oct. 6	St. Joseph, Carteret
May 22	St. Matthew the Apostle, Edison	Oct. 8	St. Joseph, Hillsborough
May 23	St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, Three Bridges	Oct. 9	Our Lady of Lourdes, Milltown
May 27	St. John Vianney, Colonia	Oct. 9	St. Augustine of Canterbury, Kendall Park
May 31	St. John Paul II, Perth Amboy	Oct. 11	St. Stephen Protomartyr, South River
June 1	Parish of the Visitation, New Brunswick	Oct. 13	St. John Neumann, Califon
June 5	St. Joseph, North, Plainfield	Oct. 19	Corpus Christi, South River
June 5	St. James, Basking Ridge	Oct. 21	Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Bernardsville
June 8	Immaculate Conception, Somerville	Oct. 24	St. Ambrose, Old Bridge
June 9	St. James, Woodbridge	Oct. 30	St. Mary-Stony Hill, Watchung
June 18	St. Charles Borromeo, Montgomery Township	Nov. 5	Immaculate Conception, Spotswood
June 19	St. John the Evangelist, Dunellen	Nov. 6	Our Lady of Victories, Sayreville
June 19	Our Lady of the Mount, Warren	Nov. 7	St. Elizabeth - St. Brigid, Far Hills - Peapack
June 30	St. Cecelia, Iselin	Nov. 9	St. Bernadette, Parlin
July 1	Our Lady of Fatima, Piscataway	Nov. 20	St. Cecilia, Monmouth Junction
July 2	St. Jude, Blairstown	Dec. 3	Immaculate Conception, Annandale
July 3	St. Theodore, Port Murray	Dec. 4	St. Mary of Ostrabrama, South River
July 3	Ss. Peter and Paul, Great Meadows	Dec. 4	St. Peter the Apostle University and Community Parish, New Brunswick
July 16	Good Shepherd, Hopelawn	Dec. 10	The Church of St. Luke, North Plainfield
July 17	St. Anthony of Padua, Port Reading	Dec. 18	St. Joseph, High Bridge
July 17	Our Lady of Fatima, Perth Amboy	Dec. 18	St. Edward the Confessor, Milford
July 23	St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Bridgewater	Dec. 24	St. Matthias, Somerset
July 24	St. Ann, Hampton	Dec. 25	Nativity of Our Lord, Monroe Township
July 24	Holy Family, New Brunswick	Jan. 8	St. Mary, South Amboy
July 26	Most Holy Name of Jesus, Perth Amboy	Jan. 8	Our Lady of Mount Carmel, New Brunswick
Aug. 2	Church of the Sacred Heart, South Plainfield	Jan. 14	Divine Mercy, Carteret
Aug. 6	Transfiguration of the Lord, Edison	Jan. 15	St. Patrick, Belvidere
Aug. 7	Most Holy Redeemer, Old Bridge	Jan. 15	St. Rose of Lima, Oxford
Aug. 7	St. Lawrence, Laurence Harbor	Jan. 15	Church of the Annunciation, Bloomsbury
Aug. 11	Our Lady of Czestochowa, South Plainfield	Jan. 22	Sacred Heart, South Amboy
Aug. 13	Our Lady of Mercy, South Bound Brook	Jan. 29	Holy Trinity, Helmetta
Aug. 14	St. Joseph, Bound Brook	Jan. 29	St. James the Less, Jamesburg
Aug. 14	Our Lady of Lourdes, Whitehouse Station	Feb. 4	Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Hackettstown
Aug. 20	Christ the Redeemer, Manville	Feb. 5	Our Lady of Victories, Baptistown
Aug. 21	Holy Trinity, Bridgewater	Feb. 5	St. Joseph, Washington Township
Aug. 21	Mary, Mother of God, Hillsborough	Feb. 17	St. Catherine of Siena, Pittstown
		Feb. 19	St. Stanislaus Kostka, Sayreville
		Feb. 25	Our Lady of Peace, Fords

'A new chapter in evangelization'

Conclusion

Last year, the Diocese of Metuchen celebrated the 35th anniversary of its creation in 1981. It is an occasion to give thanks to God. It is also an occasion for all of us to say thank you to the generation of the faithful who have built such a strong foundation for our diocese. They have raised their families in our parishes and schools, built church buildings and school buildings, and built up programs and organizations that have served the Church and society in Central New Jersey well.

Now is the time for all of us to take a new step in the life of our diocese, to move to a new level of life and growth. The diocese will be evaluating all of our work with an eye towards evangelization. This will include how we can be more effective in the use of modern technology and other social means of communicating with those who desperately need to receive the Good News. Our diocesan offices, our parishes and schools, and our hospital and social agencies must resound with the presence of Jesus Christ. Together, through fidelity and love, we must seek creative means to make the ancient message of salvation ever new in the Church of Metuchen.

I make my own the words of Pope Francis, again from his letter *The Joy of the Gospel*: "I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization.... The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization" (nn. 1, 120).

Each of you reading this letter has your own sphere of influence. Imagine if every person just affected one other person to consider Jesus again in their lives. Now is a time for holy boldness. Christ is not served by our reticence and timidity but by our confidence and trust in Him and the message that saves. Think of people in need of an invitation to return to weekly Mass or to become a Catholic, then invite them. These can be members of our own family, coworkers, and classmates at school or neighbors. We are never too young or too old to witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

When I was ordained a bishop last year, I chose as my episcopal motto the phrase *Reconciliamini Deo*. It means "Be reconciled with God," and it comes from a passage of the New Testament where St. Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth: "We are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20).

Please join me in the ministry of evangelization. Together we will serve as ambassadors for Christ! You and I are privileged to be called to carry on the very work of Jesus, reconciling the world to the Father. What an honor for us, to join the long line of people going back 2,000 thousand years. Evangelization through these core initiatives will bring forth a renewed fire of the light of Christ to the Diocese of Metuchen. Let us strive together to kindle the fire within us, so to share this beautiful light with others.

I take this opportunity to entrust all of us to the care of the patroness of our diocese: Mary, Our Queen. Mary indeed is the star of the new evangelization. Wherever the Church flourishes, it is always because our Mother is close by. May she wrap her mantle around us and take us safely to her Son.

I thank you for your thoughtful consideration of these words, and I ask God's abundant blessings upon you and your loved ones.



Before offering Mass at the diocese's Priest Convocation held Oct. 25-27, Bishop James F. Checchio spends quiet time in prayer in front of a statue of Mary holding the Baby Jesus. The bishop served as principal celebrant and homilist at the Mass at St. Catharine Church, Spring Lake. In his homily Bishop Checchio told his priests, "It is an ongoing challenge to reorient our lives to become more and more like Jesus.... Discipleship is the challenge to actively conform our lives to Christ every day. Never tire of the challenge to grow in holiness."

— *The Catholic Spirit* file photo