

July 3-7, 1985

A WEEK WITH FIFTY TEENAGERS

Most Rev. Thomas J. Murphy

As Bishop I am invited to and take part in a host of activities in the course of a year. These range from church celebrations to Confirmations to visits to parish communities. I meet with the priests, religious men and women, deacons and laity in countless settings from the Presbyteral Council to the Sisters' Council to Parish Councils to other groups such as the Knights of Columbus, the DCCW, the Cum Christo Secretariat as well as various diocesan commissions. One group of people I also meet with on a regular basis is the young people of our diocese. It is always exciting to meet with them in parishes, our Catholic schools or CCD settings before Confirmation or at the Youth Rallies for the Diocese or in the Vicariates. I believe as Bishop it is important to be in contact with young people because of the leadership role they play now within the Church and the community, as well as the role they will enjoy in the future as adults.

Each year our Diocese under its Division of Youth Services under Mr. James Sciegel sponsors a week-long Christian Leadership Institute (CLI) in Red Lodge. Freshmen to Seniors in High School are invited to attend this Institute in order to develop leadership potential which they are then asked to share with other young people in their parish communities. Each year, after CLI, I hear about the great experience young people and adult leaders have at this annual event.

In a moment of bravery last March, I volunteered to Mr. Jim Sciegel that I would like to be Chaplain for this year's CLI. Somewhat surprised, but happy, Jim thought it would be a great idea. I thought so too during April and May, but as the end of June approached, I began to ask myself: was I really serious in spending a week with fifty teenagers? Was this part of the job description for a Bishop? Wasn't it much easier to talk with parents about teenagers instead of living with them? I learned later that many priests and others were also asking the same question and were wagering on how long I would last.

These and a host of other questions ran through my mind, but June 30th approached and no viable excuse was available. I packed my sleeping bag, a couple of cans of "Off," a supply of Pepsi Free, and I made the leap into a week with teenagers.

The days before CLI were somewhat hectic with a 50th anniversary of priesthood celebration for Msgr. Gluszek in Great Falls on Thursday, the ordination of Fr. Jim O'Neil in Havre on Friday, a wedding in Billings on Saturday, followed by a trip back and forth to St. Philip's in Wibaux on Sunday. I finally arrived at CLI in Red Lodge on Sunday around 11:00 P.M.

The young people had already been in session for several hours reflecting on the meaning of community and leadership. Exhausted as I was, I must have impressed the group when I walked in the door as an advertisement for a Home for the Aged. Yet, entering into the activities that first evening

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and throughout the following days, I discovered even more so the tremendous gifts which young people offer - the gift of openness, of life, of enthusiasm, of hope.

CLI is a week-long experience which helps young people discover their skills for leadership and Christian ministry within the Roman Catholic Church. CLI challenges young people to share insights and knowledge in order to grow in faith together. Most of all, CLI fosters the spiritual development of the participants by offering them an opportunity to celebrate their faith as Roman Catholics through daily prayer and worship with the highlight being the daily celebration of the Eucharist.

Under the direction this year of Marcie Wilske and a group of adults and young people as part of the Formation Team and as Support Group Leaders and as a Community Program and Spirituality Team, CLI offers personal attention to each participant. Morning sessions took the themes of communication, planning, group dynamics, consensus seeking and affirmation as the basis for input, discussion, involvement, and feedback. Afternoon sessions focused on prayer, moral decision making, community and ministry through small support groups under the direction of a trained adult leader with time offered for private prayer and reflection. The evening brought the different groups together to plan for the liturgy, the prayer experiences the next day, or just how you manage to wake 50 young people up the next morning.

Ending the day was the real highlight for myself as I gathered with the young people to celebrate the Eucharist. We celebrated in Word and Sacrament the reality of a God who loves each person and calls them to share His life: we celebrated what it means to be a community of believers in the Roman Catholic Church today; we celebrated the cost involved in being a disciple of Jesus; we celebrated the ministry to which we are called and the love we should have for God and one another. I also enjoyed the opportunity to offer the Sacrament of Reconciliation with the young people as well as the time spent in one on one conversation.

What did I learn about young people during this week? I learned that they are very human like each of us. They can be lonely and isolated; they enjoy being recognized and affirmed. As young people in today's society, they recognize the pressures placed on them in everything from drugs and alcohol to sexuality. Like so many others, they are struggling with their own feelings and the expectations of others - whether it be parents or Church or school. They, like all of us, yearn to be appreciated and loved, especially by parents, and they enjoy and need the friendship and support of peers. They are anxious to and want to communicate with parents and adults, but often they are at a loss how to do so. But over and over again, so many expressed a desire for something more - for being able to be in contact with God, to have time alone to talk with God in prayer, to have the courage and support to do what is right.

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Was it a good experience for everyone? To some extent, I would have to say "Yes." Some were perhaps not ready for the challenges they received; others were burdened with worries and concerns and just could not invest themselves fully. Yet, each and every young person present at different times showed a spark of God's grace and power touching his or her life. And when God reaches out to touch us and we open ourselves to His grace, then it is amazing what power and energy is unleashed.

To all at CLI for 1985, thank you for inviting an aging bishop into your midst. Like the characters in the new movie Cocoon, I think I received a new breath of life from the young people who shared their life and faith with me. Only one question remains as I reflect on CLI for 1985: I wonder if they will invite me back next year!