‘Lord, now you let your servant go in peace’
A Reflection at the Threshold of Change

“I am returning you to your native land.” Such were the words of Pope John Paul II when he named me the tenth Bishop of Helena in 2004. The joy I experienced upon returning home to Montana 14 years ago remains palpable today as you and I stand at the threshold of another change.

In February, Pope Francis named me the third bishop of the Diocese of Las Vegas. I will be installed on May 15. A new place, new people, and new challenges await me in a diocese that is 15 times larger than our own. For the Diocese of Helena, it will be a time of prayerful anticipation as you await a new bishop.

It is never easy to leave people and a place you love. Immersing oneself in a community is a great joy of being a priest and bishop, but with joy comes the sorrow of parting. As my departure nears, I look back on 14 years and am grateful to God for the grace He has given us as a diocese, not only to weather challenges, but also for growth and renewal. I am aware, as I reflect, of the great work of Divine Providence in these past years.

Faced with sad abuse claims from the past against clergy and others, the diocese confronted its most daunting challenge. The harm to the lives of the victims was incalculable and the way forward was not always clear. With wise counsel, we chose a path of reconciliation and pastoral care, and in the end reached a mediated settlement that avoided a protracted and costly legal battle. The process was not without difficulty and sacrifice; justice and compassion demanded that we make monetary and pastoral provisions for victim survivors. My goal was to do so in a way that, to the extent possible, preserved ministries and allowed the diocese a pathway to rebuild. Ultimately, we spent less than five hours in bankruptcy court and reached a solution praised by the judge as “a singular achievement” in his 30 years on the bench.

In the wake of the settlement, we moved ahead with a master plan for restoring fiscal stability to the diocese. Overhauling our financial structure has resulted in unprecedented transparency and accountability. I cannot overstate how important it was to me, as your Bishop, to put a plan in place for restoring funds parishes lost in the Deposit and Loan. Our creative response was to utilize fallow diocesan property to create the Trinity Development in Helena, an independent business venture that will generate revenue to restore parish funds. It is a long-term plan but we are beginning to see the early fruits. The new hotel, a Hilton Home2 Suites, opened for business this spring. Further development on the property will continue. As the Trinity project begins to prosper, the profits

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The Vacant Diocese

With Bishop Thomas’ transfer to the Diocese of Las Vegas, the Diocese of Helena begins the interregnum, or period between bishops. Once the transfer was announced on February 28, Bishop Thomas, by canon law, became the Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Helena. When Bishop Thomas takes possession of his new diocese at the ceremony of Installation in Las Vegas on May 15, the Diocese of Helena will be what is known as sede vacante, or a vacant see (diocese). Once the diocese is vacant, the College of Consultors (body of priests that advises the bishop on administrative matters) must meet within eight days to select a diocesan administrator.

What does a diocesan administrator do?
The diocesan administrator is bound by the obligations and exercises the authority of the diocesan bishop, with the restriction that when the diocese is vacant, there are to be no innovations. Generally, the role is to undertake the usual administrative tasks without taking new steps that would prejudice the rights of a new bishop. Msgr. Kevin O’Neill, who served as diocesan administrator prior to Bishop Thomas’ installation, likened the work to the steady progress of knitting rather than tinkering.

The diocesan administrator takes office as soon as he accepts election. His office as administrator ceases when the new bishop takes possession of the diocese, usually when he is installed as diocesan bishop.

How is a new bishop selected?
The following is a general description of the complex discernment process for selecting a bishop.

Archbishop Christophe Pierre, the Apostolic Nuncio to the United States, will seek reports on the situation and needs of the Diocese of Helena from Bishop Thomas and other bishops, especially those in the northwest, as well as selected priests, religious and lay persons from the Diocese of Helena.

The Nuncio is seeking in strictest confidence, both information about the Diocese itself and the qualities that will assist a new bishop, with the goal of surfacing the best possible candidates.

Canon law lists qualities for a bishop, including: at least 35 years of age, a priest for at least five years, outstanding in strong faith, good morals, piety, zeal for souls, wisdom, prudence and human virtues; and he should be well versed in sacred Scripture, theology and canon law and, preferably, hold a doctorate in one of these fields.

Following the work of consultation, the Nuncio will submit a terna, a list of three candidates, to the Congregation for Bishops. The Congregation will review the candidates and make a recommendation to Pope Francis, who makes the final choice and names our new bishop.

How long before The Diocese of Helena has a new bishop?
There is no strict time-frame for the process. The many factors involved in consultation and review can take at least six to eight months, and sometimes longer.
Seminarian Spotlight: Shannon Augare

Cody Tredik

For Shannon Augare, both the physical foundation of his home parish and his spiritual foundation, rest firmly on the faith of his family. “I am so inspired by stories of my great-grandparents. In their time, Little Flower Parish in Browning was built with rock from the family ranch,” he said. “My faith and my love of the Church were instilled in me by my family from the very beginning.”

Born in Tacoma, Wash., Shannon’s family moved often. “My father was a federal officer, which meant that I was raised all over the northwest. Growing up, I attended 14 different schools before we settled outside of Browning when I was in 7th grade.” In his childhood, Shannon was already actively involved with his faith and his parish community. “I remember that even as early as kindergarten I had a love for faith. I had a very strong attachment to my grandmother, Nancy, who would take me with her to daily Mass. As I grew up I became more involved in ministries, sang in the choir, and attended youth camps.”

Shannon became increasingly interested in politics and ran for the Montana House of Representatives in 2006, where he served until 2010. During his time there he was elected House Majority Whip. In 2010 he served in the Montana Senate for District 8. His committee work included initiatives on economic development in rural and native America, wind energy, and family asset building programs.

“I believe that politics has prepared me to be a better servant to God,” he said. “As a politician, I strived to listen well to the needs around me, and then worked hard to advocate for them. As a priest I can expand and build on this service by helping communities be stronger in faith, and in love for one another.”

After leaving the political world in 2013, Shannon returned home to his family for a year, where he was able to discern what was next for his life. “It was during this time that I was asked by a former professor, who was also the director of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul of North Central Montana in Great Falls, if I would come and take over as Director.”

For over 50 years, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul has worked in Great Falls and beyond, currently providing a food bank, thrift store, and veteran’s homeless shelter. As director, Shannon planned and oversaw the creation of the Grace Home, the first north central Montana veteran’s homeless shelter. “This is transitional housing for homeless veterans in the community. We would also go out with clothing and food to the bridges to offer service directly to those suffering from homelessness. It was important to bring a new level of awareness to the community about the needs of this group, and bring faith back as a primary focus of the organization.”

Of the work, Shannon said; “It was a very rewarding experience in many ways, but the thankfulness that we encountered, and the beauty of seeing faith in action, was the push that sent me into seminary. As I discerned this, there was a quote that stuck with me: ‘Blessed are those who give without remembering, and those who receive without forgetting.’”

Currently studying at Mt. Angel Seminary in Mt. Angel, Ore., he will complete his undergraduate studies in May, and begins graduate studies in Theology this August. “It has been an incredible two years,” he said. “I’m learning every day to seek the things above, to take words like joy, peace, love, and to live them by putting them into action.”

“I’m very excited to be a servant in the Diocese of Helena, for I know that the peace of Christ resides here. I’m most looking forward to celebrating the sacraments. Baptizing newborns, ministering to the sick, and being a part of those special family moments, that’s what excites me most.”

Diocesan Church Gathers for Chrism Mass

The Chrism Mass for the Diocese of Helena was celebrated at the Cathedral of St. Helena on March 19. Bishop George Leo Thomas presided as the oil of the sick and the oil of catechumens were blessed and sacred chrism consecrated to be used in parishes throughout the diocese in the coming year. The Mass includes a renewal of commitment by all the baptized, religious and lay pastoral ministers, deacons and priests.

The Mass is a celebration of Christ instituting the priesthood at the Last Supper and, symbolized as delegates receive the holy oils to take back to their parishes, it constitutes a fidelity to the mission of the bishop and the greater diocesan church.

Prior to Mass, a group of participants gathered at St. Mary Parish in Helena to hear lecturer, educator and this year’s Chrism Mass Homilist, Fr. Mark Francis, CSV who serves as president of the Chicago Theological Union. Widely respected for his work in liturgical studies, Fr. Francis has written numerous books and articles on liturgy, including Liturgy in a Culturally Diverse Community: A Guide Toward Understanding (Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commission: Washington, D.C., 2012) and Shape a Circle Ever Wider: Inculturating the Liturgy in the United States (Liturgy Training Publications, 2000).

Notably, and as this was Bishop Thomas’ final Chrism Mass as Bishop of the Diocese of Helena, Msgr. Kevin O’Neill, Rector of the Cathedral of St. Helena, gave heartfelt thanks to Bishop Thomas for the leadership, sacrifice and vision that he has provided during his 14 years as Bishop.
A Grace-filled Success Story: Preserving Legendary Lodge for Future Generations

John Barnes
Director of Development Services
Diocese of Helena

Each camper might answer differently when asked what he or she remembers most about Legendary Lodge, but the disparate memories unite to weave a rich tapestry: The Lodge is a place where our youth deepen their relationship with Christ, grow in fellowship with one another, and experience adventures in an iconic outdoor setting.

Alumni and their families know the pivotal role the Lodge plays in faith formation; they know the legacy because they are part of it. Because of Bishop Thomas’s vision as well as the generosity and hard work of many individuals, that legacy is destined to be part of our future, not just our past.

In 2014, as Bishop Thomas undertook the monumental task of shepherding the diocese through a bankruptcy and financial reorganization, the Lodge faced an uncertain future. It could claim an appraised value of nearly $4 million, but Bishop Thomas understood that its value in the life of our Church was beyond measure.

The dilemma was straightforward but far from simple: Sell the Lodge or find another way to generate several million dollars for other pressing needs. “The quandary literally drove me to my knees in prayer,” Bishop Thomas confides. “On more nights than I can count, I found myself awake at 3:00 a.m., the hour of Our Lady, and so I prayed in earnest for a path forward.”

The answers to those prayers came from donors who shared their resources, from supporters who worked to turn ideas into reality, from board members of the Foundation for the Diocese of Helena, and from every person who prayed for success. It is because of them that Legendary Lodge will continue to be a place of renewal and encounter for our youth, and for all who visit.

The diocese is now focusing on long-overdue renovations that will not only expand the summer-camp capacity, but also create more space for retreats and other gatherings. Additionally, we are looking at ways the Lodge facilities might be configured and accessed for potential year-round use.

For Lodge campers, memories made on the shores of Salmon Lake endure long after the experiences that forge them. The positive impacts of those experiences are felt in every parish and community. Working together as a diocese, as the people of God in western Montana, we are committed to building on the recent success and moving ahead to ensure the Lodge’s future is as rich as its past.
Teen’s Faith “Lifted” at 41st Annual CYC Convention

Cody Tredik

On the weekend of March 9-11, 200 high school students gathered at Carroll College in Helena for the 41st annual Catholic Youth Coalition (CYC) Convention. The theme this year was Lifted, inspired by John’s gospel as Jesus says to Nicodemus, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him might have eternal life.” (Jn 3:14)

34 parishes from around the Diocese of Helena were represented, and a large group from the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings attended as well.

The first night began with prayer in the Carroll Campus Center, as two youth emcees, Senior Ray Shipman of Dillon and Senior Kacie Barrett of Kalispell, led the group in the opening decade of the rosary. Different parish groups came to the front to lead decades as the conference progressed.

The group transitioned to the lower campus center where most of the sessions and keynotes would take place. Two youth keynotes took the stage first. Hattie Fauque of Great Falls and Jason Miller of Arlee spoke to their peers about the struggles and successes in their personal walk of faith. Both spoke to the healing power of mercy in their lives. Frs. Christopher Lebsock and Kirby Longo led the group in reflection prior to the sacrament of Reconciliation. Priests from across the diocese came together to hear the confessions of their young people, while the CYC Board, a group of youth leaders from across the diocese and beyond who help plan and organize ministry events for the year, helped youth reflect on God’s Mercy by performing shadow Stations of the Cross.

Saturday kept the momentum going with four youth keynotes throughout the day: Molleigh Siebenaler of Victor, Shae Bills of Bozeman, Mia Simatovic of Hamilton, and Jovany Guillen of Dillon.

Saturday afternoon set the students loose to attend two out of eight workshops offered around campus. The workshops varied in theme from keeping faith in college and discernment, to finding faith in pop culture. The speakers came from various backgrounds in youth and campus ministry.

The main keynote for the general sessions was introduced as he came down the aisle from the back of the room in character as a sassy elderly woman named Estelle. Estelle was just one of many characterizations brought to life by Catholic comedian and storyteller Doug Brummel. Brummel is nationally known for his Lighten Up! Ministries, a traveling presentation emphasizing the importance of owning ones’ faith, evangelization, and the power of the Church family. Brummel’s character impressions range from a quirky non-believer looking to join the Church to a parish handyman as he zeroes in on faith and the human condition with humor and compassion.

He’s presented his theater style performance at the National Catholic Youth Conference and the National Religious Education Conference. The crowd was in stitches as Brummel and his characters explored our Catholic faith with the help of volunteers from the audience.

On Sunday morning, two final youth keynotes addressed their peers: Mallory Phillibur of Potomac and Jake Bubb of Helena. Doug Brummel also gave a final performance and address. To close the convention, the winners of the Outstanding Youth Award were presented. The Outstanding Youth Award is given every year to a male and female high school student who is nominated by their youth ministers as being exemplary disciples, role models, and leaders in their faith communities. This year the award went to Ray Shipman of Dillon and Hailey James of Helena.

Fr. Marc Lenneman, chaplain of Carroll College, then invited the seniors up for a special blessing and commissioning as they prepare to graduate and head on to the next stage of their lives. The group prayed their final decade of the rosary, bringing the 41st CYC Convention to a close.
**PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS**

Father, you call each one of us by name and ask us to follow you. Bless your church by raising up dedicated and generous leaders from our families and friends who will serve your people as Sisters, Priests, Brothers, Deacons, and Lay Ministers.

Inspire us as we grow to know you, and open our hearts to hear your call.

We ask this in Jesus’ name

Amen.