

A History of the Diocese of Arlington

Part II: The First Decade of a New Diocese (1974-1983)

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On Ascension Thursday, 1974, Bishop Thomas J. Welsh, rector of St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Philadelphia, was invited to a meeting with Philadelphia's Cardinal John Krol. Bishop Welsh expected to be discussing routine seminary business as the academic year was coming to an end. What was coming to an end, however, was not only an academic year but also Bishop Welsh's tenure as the seminary's rector. What was about to begin was a new adventure in his own priestly ministry and a new chapter in the history of the Catholic Church in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

On that Ascension Thursday, Cardinal Krol informed Bishop Welsh that he had been named the founding bishop of the soon-to-be-created Diocese of Arlington, a particular church to be formed from among the faithful living in the northern portion of the diocese of Richmond. The new diocese would initially include 50 parishes which would be served by 70 diocesan and religious priests.

In a recent interview, Bishop Welsh recalled that although at the time of his appointment as bishop of Arlington he knew none of the priests and few of the lay people living in the new diocese, he soon felt at home among priests and lay people whom he would describe as "good, loyal and honest".

The founding bishop of a newly-created diocese comes without a blueprint for the work he is about to begin, but with "confidence in [the] counsel" he received from brother bishops as well as the people of God in Arlington, Bishop Welsh took possession of Diocese of Arlington on the day of its foundation, Aug. 13, 1974. The ceremony took place at St. Thomas More Cathedral in Arlington at which Baltimore's Archbishop William Borders presided and Apostolic Nuncio Archbishop Jean Jadot read the papal bull erecting the diocese and naming Bishop Welsh its first bishop.

Among Bishop Welsh's first tasks was to appoint members of the diocesan curia who would assist him in the administration of the new diocese. Msgr. Paul Heller was the diocese's first vicar general, Msgr. Richard Burke its first chancellor, Msgr. Justin McClunn the first judicial vicar, Msgr. Gabriel Maioriello, secretary for Catholic education, and Father Richard Ley was the first vocations director.

Bishop Welsh recalls that the people of the Arlington diocese were filled with great excitement as they shared in the birth of this new family of faith. Numerous invitations to meet and become acquainted with the people of the new diocese, along with the usual opportunities to visit parishes for the celebration of Confirmation filled the schedule of the new bishop during his first months in the new diocese.

The first days in the history of the diocese were also an opportunity for Bishop Welsh to make known his pastoral priorities to the people whom he was called to lead and serve. By including a secretary for Catholic edu-



MARCHING BISHOP — Bishop Thomas J. Welsh, founding bishop of the Diocese of Arlington, regularly attended the annual March for Life in Washington.

cation and a vocations director among his first "cabinet" appointments, Bishop Welsh signaled the importance he attached to Catholic education and the promotion of vocations to the priesthood and religious life. By the end of his tenure as Arlington's bishop, there would be plans in motion to open another Catholic high school in the diocese (Paul VI). Christendom College, the Notre Dame Institute and the Catholic Home Study Institute (now the Catholic Distance University) would begin their efforts to contribute to Catholic higher education, and Catholic elementary schools and religious education programs would continue the work of assisting parents in handing on the faith to children and young people in the diocese.

Bishop Welsh made a priority the promotion of vocations to the priesthood and religious life. On May 10, 1975, Father Robert Avella became the first priest ordained by Bishop Welsh since his installation as bishop of Arlington the previous summer. Father Avella would later become the second vocations director in the history of the diocese, and he would be succeeded in that office by Father James Gould, whom Bishop Welsh also ordained to the priesthood.

In recalling the milestones of his tenure as Arlington's first bishop, Bishop Welsh also remembers fondly the arrival of the Poor Clares as the first cloistered community of women religious in the diocese on July 7, 1977. The Poor Clares, along with the cloistered community of Trappist priests and brothers in Berryville, are joined by many other men and women religious who serve in a variety of apostolates in the diocese, especially in education and parish ministry.

Lest anyone jump to the conclusion that Bishop Welsh's attention was focussed exclusively on religious and priestly vocations, it needs also to be recalled that among his first initiatives in the Diocese of Arlington was the establishment of the diocesan Office for Family Life. Initially under the direction of Father Franklyn McAfee, this office has existed since its inception to assist priests and parish ministers in the work

of marriage preparation. The office propagates the Church's teachings on marriage and family life and it provides leadership in the diocesan effort to encourage a greater respect for the dignity and value of all human life.

As the bishop of a diocese so close to the nation's capital, Bishop Welsh always considered it both "an opportunity and a responsibility" to pro-

extended to his support for the work of Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Arlington which opened Christ House in Alexandria during his tenure as bishop. During these early years in the diocese's history, the new bishop witnessed the hospitality and love of the faithful who opened their homes and their parishes to numerous Vietnamese refugees who would eventually be welcomed in the parish named in honor of the Holy Martyrs of Vietnam which opened in 1979.

Any history of the first years of the diocese must also include mention of the establishment of a diocesan pastoral council composed of both priests and lay members of the Christian faithful, the Spanish Apostolate, the Office of Youth Activities, and the inauguration of an award-winning diocesan newspaper, the *Arlington Catholic Herald*.

Bishop Welsh erected seven new parishes during his tenure as bishop: St. Stephen the Martyr, Middleburg (1975), St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, Lake Ridge (1976), Our Lady of the Blue Ridge, Madison (1977), St. Catherine of Siena, Great Falls (1979), St. John Neumann, Reston (1979), Holy Martyrs of Vietnam, Arlington (1979), and St. Patrick, Chancellorsville (1983).

After leading God's people in the diocese for nearly the first decade of its life, Bishop Welsh returned to his na-



MONASTERY DEDICATION — Bishop Welsh stands with the Poor Clares at the dedication of their new monastery. Standing next to the bishop is Msgr. Justin D. McClunn, former diocesan judicial vicar; Jack Connell, former fiscal manager for the diocese; and Fred Sheridan, architect for the new monastery.

claim the Church's teaching that all human life is sacred from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death. He was always visible in leading the faithful of the diocese in a variety of pro-life activities, especially the annual March for Life which was initiated after the Roe v. Wade decision was handed down by the U.S. Supreme Court in the year preceding the formation of the Diocese of Arlington (1973).

Bishop Welsh's commitment to promoting the dignity of all human life

tive Pennsylvania after being named bishop of Allentown on Feb. 8, 1983. To this day, Bishop Welsh remembers fondly many people who welcomed him warmly as the first bishop of the Diocese of Arlington, and looking back at the first decade of its existence, the faithful of this diocese can recall fondly an auspicious start to its own history as a family of faith.

Next week: The Bishop Keating years.

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