

At age 86, Hot Springs Village pastor will retire in June

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |



The wit and wisdom of Msgr. Bernard Malone

- An essential lesson for any parish: "I always felt if the children were taken care of, the adults could take care of themselves."
- Children today don't have enough play time. "Children are too over-scheduled these days. They don't have time to be children any more. We're expecting them to be adults before they get there (to adulthood)." Scripture is very clear, he said, that Jesus grew in "grace and knowledge" and this didn't happen with an over-scheduled life.
- What the Church had in the past that it most needs now: "We need another person like Bishop Fulton J. Sheen who can go to the airwaves and carry on his ministry. I think the closest we have had since his time was Mother Teresa."
- The old Church versus the new Church: "You don't want to go back. The old Church was only one point in time. That was when Jesus named his apostles, when Simon became Peter. That was the old Church and it has since moved on. Now we're in the new Church. It's a living Church. It's very much alive."
- What makes a good priest: "I think there are two essential things. You must have a strong essential love of the Blessed Sacrament and a deep, abiding — a filial love — of Mary and Joseph, because they were the parents of Jesus."

HOT SPRINGS VILLAGE — Priests don't learn how to move fire trucks in seminary. But Msgr. Bernard G. Malone had to, so he could celebrate the first Mass in this planned community. He recalls how he prepared for the Wednesday evening event.

"I had to move the fire truck out of the station and set up the station for Mass and Bible study," recalled Malone, now 86 and pastor at Sacred Heart of Jesus Church. "You see, at the time Hot

Springs Village only had about 2,000 people. Now it has 16,000. There were 17 people who wanted to build a church. So that was the beginning of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Church."

Msgr. Malone celebrated his birthday Jan. 23. He is the oldest diocesan priest serving as a pastor in the Diocese of Little Rock. But it also will be his last year to serve as a pastor. He will celebrate a 60th anniversary of ordination June 3. On that day, he also will retire from full-time ministry and move to live at St. John Manor in Little Rock.

He could have retired at age 70, but he chose not.

"When I was ordained I kept to a principle that you're ordained not for weeks, months or years, you are ordained forever. You're a priest until you close your eyes in death," he said, and paused for a moment. "I know people preach 'retire,' and I'm going to retire, but there's still work to be done."

And work hard he has. His pastoral resume has crossed every quadrant of the state: Blytheville, North Little Rock, Pine Bluff, Tontitown, Paragould, the Cathedral of St. Andrew in Little Rock, West Memphis, Hot Springs, Fort Smith, Bella Vista, Jacksonville/Carlisle and Hot Springs Village. At seven parishes, Msgr. Malone worked as associate pastor. At 20 parishes, he worked as pastor.

Perhaps one of the most fantastic stories about his life had to do with how he met Pope John Paul II before being elected pope. At the time, Cardinal Karol Wojtyla had spent the day with Cardinal John Krol, touring Philadelphia. In the evening, Msgr. Malone found himself seated next to Cardinal Wojtyla at an invitation-only dinner in a Philadelphia restaurant owned by a man named Johnny. Cardinal Wojtyla wrote a permission slip note for the person who would bring any photos or articles about the visit to the city to Rome.

"Then he was elected pope," Msgr. Malone said. "Johnny can't go, but I was going so he gave them (articles and permission letter) to me to bring over. It's a good thing he did because that's what I showed to the guard."

As the story goes, the first guard wouldn't let Msgr. Malone anywhere near the papal apartment. Undaunted, he walked around and a little closer to the papal apartments. A second guard read his permission slip. The guard knocked on a door, and to Msgr. Malone's surprise, Pope John Paul II stood on the other side. Pope John Paul II saw the letter and recognized Msgr. Malone immediately. They chatted briefly and the Holy Father gave him a relic of the True Cross before they parted.

It is fair to say that Msgr. Malone's determination to see the pope has been shown ever since he decided to become a priest.

He grew up during the Depression in Pennsylvania. Northern seminaries were full. The young Msgr. Malone, along with the late Msgr. George Tribou and Msgr. John F. O'Donnell of Little Rock traveled to enroll at St. John Home Mission Seminary in Little Rock.

"We came down with the intention of staying," he said. "It was the first time I was out of Pennsylvania. It was a big difference in 1942. I had not seen too many horse and buggies, but when you got to Ohio and Little Rock, you saw a lot of horse and buggies."

Ordination followed in 1950. Then-Bishop Albert L. Fletcher charged him to work with the

youths of the diocese. Father Malone organized the Catholic Youth Organization here. Next, he formed the Parochial School League. After that, in the late 1950s, he started a Senior CYO for young adults ages 18 to 25.

He also recalled the Little Rock integration crisis of 1957. He still feels that the top-down approach to resolving it was less effective. Proving him correct, Bishop Fletcher led all Catholic parishes through a Lenten catechism at the time for all Arkansas parishes.

"Bishop Fletcher was a dyed-in-the-wool-Southerner, but he stuck with the Lord and gave a theological discussion of why we need to treat every one with respect. It was masterful," Msgr. Malone said.

Family ties ran deep in the Malone family and those connections are what brought Father Malone's nephew here. His brother, Joe, became a widower with nine children when his son, Frank, was in high school. The family pulled together. Father Malone agreed to take in Frank for a year.

"He (Frank) was a good cook so I took him down to McGehee where I was pastor," he said.

Frank decided to enter the seminary and was ordained in 1977. He now is Msgr. Francis I. Malone, pastor of Christ the King Church in Little Rock.

"I'm real proud of him," the uncle said of his nephew. "He still looks to me for advice from time to time."

Those reminders of his family have stayed with him through the years. He came from a family of six boys and two girls. A framed portrait of Jesus from the 1920s hangs in his Hot Springs Village office with the name of each sibling clearly written at the bottom in fountain pen ink.

The monsignor had a twin brother, John, who died in 1972. That brother set up a fund for his priest sibling to afford a new car every other year. Keep in mind that in the 1950s and 1960s, a high mileage car had 100,000 miles on it. In the years in McGehee, it wasn't uncommon to drive 40,000 miles a year between that city, St. John Center and other parishes.

While he's retired, he might have time to pursue his favorite hobby of bowling. Once, he came close to a perfect 300 score. Two pins prevented the favorable outcome. More likely, past parishioners will find him living at St. John Manor in Little Rock. Msgr. Scott Friend, vicar general and vocation director, has asked Msgr. Malone to become involved with the young men at the diocesan Discernment House.

He'll be able to teach them a thing or two about the religious life — including how to move a fire truck.