

# An interview with Bishop-elect Michael G. McGovern

By **CHRISTOPHER ORLET**  
Editor

*The Messenger spoke by phone to Bishop-elect Michael G. McGovern on April 6. Father McGovern graciously agreed to answer a few questions for the newspaper so that Catholics in the Diocese of Belleville might get to know him better.*

*How surprised were you when you received the call from the Apostolic Nuncio informing you that Pope Francis had appointed you the ninth Bishop of Belleville?*

Very. The phone rang and I saw the area code was (202) Washington, DC. The Apostolic Nuncio Christophe Pierre introduced himself and asked if I were alone. I said, Yes. Then he said, the Holy Father is appointing you bishop of Belleville, and I said I accept the Holy Father's appointment.

*When did you first realize you wanted to be a priest?*

The idea first came to me when I was in second grade during preparation for Holy Communion. In high school, I was very involved with the Church, often attending Mass five times during the week. I became a lector and participated in my parish choir. It helped me to look at the priesthood more closely.

After college, in my mid-twenties, I worked for a few years as a paralegal at a bank, while attending law school in the evenings where I studied real estate law, but the idea of a religious vocation kept tugging at my arm.

I attended one of those exploring vocations weekends at the seminary in the fall and winter and by spring I had the sense that I really needed to do this. I entered the seminary and never went back to law school.

*What was your family life like growing up?*

I am the youngest of eight siblings, one of whom is deceased. We grew up on the south side of Chicago, and most of my siblings still live there. My parents were school teachers. My mother sometimes taught sewing classes at night. My father was a public school teacher. In later years he took a job teaching inmates in the Cook County Jail. Of all my siblings, I was the only one who had a religious vocation.

*Who would you say influenced you in your vocation?*

I always liked my parish priests—they were good role models—as were the Jesuit teachers who taught me during my high school and college years. One of them was Father Mitch Pacwa, known to many as a host on the Eternal World Television Network.

Growing up, I had two great aunts who were Sisters of Mercy. They often came to our home for family gatherings



Father Michael G. McGovern

and proved very influential. We used to drive to the convent and pick them up on holidays and bring them to our home. But mostly you discover things for yourself along the way.

In the act of discernment you ask yourself three questions: Does God want me to do this? Do I want to do this? And can I do this? Then, when you go to seminary, you realize I can do this.

*You have described yourself as pastoral. How will that be reflected in your day-to-day duties as bishop?*

A bishop has to be a pastoral presence, you have to be father and brother to the priests of the diocese and shepherd the faithful of the parishes, as well as those overlooked by society. And you must promote and protect life in all its phases.

*How can the Catholic Church convince more Catholics to come home to the Church?*

I would first mention that we have to do better in helping people stay within

the Church; especially our young people. The studies show that young people are deciding at an earlier age whether or not they will continue living as Catholic disciples of Jesus Christ. So more of our resources must be directed toward helping young people grow as committed disciples.

In cases where people have drifted from the practice of our faith, I believe we have to offer folks various points of re-entry to Catholic life. That includes frequent and well-publicized opportunities for confession. Having guest speakers and preachers, book clubs and service opportunities might also be ways that people can connect with the Church and eventually say: "I want to start attending Mass again; what do I need to do?"

*What will be your priorities during your first year (or two) as bishop?*

In time as I listen to people in the diocese, I am sure several priorities will emerge. For the moment, I think pastoral presence is important: I am eager to visit the parishes and meet the priests, parish staffs and the people. I want to be visible in the diocese.

The second priority will be vocations; we need to continue fostering a culture of vocations. I am convinced that God calls people to various forms of service in the Church; in a particular way we need to focus on vocations to the priesthood, the diaconate and the consecrated life.

*What are your thoughts on the state of the Catholic Church today? In particular the closing of schools, parishes, and the problem of empty pews?*

There are certainly challenges in communicating the Gospel in a way that the spark will catch in people's souls, in communicating that Jesus is Lord and he wants a relationship with you, and then you respond by forming a relationship with him.

In families, you can never be quite sure why the spark of faith catches in some and not in others. You just have to keep sowing seeds regardless. As Mother Teresa said, God doesn't call us to be successful, God calls us to be faithful.

*How important is a Catholic education these days?*

I come from a family of teachers. I believe in Catholic education and my parents certainly did. They sent us to Catholic primary and secondary schools, and most of us went to Catholic college.

Catholic schools form the whole person, intellectually and spiritually, teaching our youth that God made me, that he cherishes and calls me by name to follow Jesus Christ. Catholic schools help us discover that we have a lot of gifts and how we can use our gifts to glorify the Lord. I believe a Catholic education offers more opportunities to form a young person because we have more time to work with the students. There are lots of good and bad influences for children in our culture. Catholic schools are a good influence.

Youth Ministry is similarly important. We must ask how can we communicate to our youth in a way that will connect with them, in particular the idea of Christ's offer of friendship.

*I have read elsewhere that your interests include Italian art, English literature and the Chicago White Sox. Are there any Sox players or works of literature that particularly stand out to you?*

The White Sox pitcher Wilbur Wood, an old knuckleballer from the 1970s. He was hit by a line drive which broke his kneecap, but he came back the next season to pitch again and had some good seasons despite his injury. I admire his tenacity.

As for literature, there is one book by the British novelist Evelyn Waugh I return to again and again, a biography of the Jesuit martyr Edmund Campion. I must have read it a dozen times growing up. He is such a heroic figure. I highly recommend it.

*Do you have a favorite scriptural passage that you would like to share?*

Luke 5—1:11. When Jesus first called his disciples.

*Is there anything the people of the Diocese of Belleville can do to make you feel welcome as you begin your ministry here?*

I can be pretty good with names, but I'd appreciate it if people keep repeating their names as I meet them so I can better remember them!

*Do you have any final thoughts you would like to share with our readers?*

I am very much looking forward to coming to the Diocese of Belleville. The ring a bishop wears on his right hand symbolizes that he is espoused to his diocese and the diocese is espoused to the bishop. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Father's appointment that God brings us together.