



**Msgr. Harry D. Greig, Diocesan Administrator, was the celebrant and homilist at the 2006 Memorial Mass for Deceased Members of the Companions of Honor held Nov. 4 in the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. The Most Reverend Jude Speyrer, Bishop-emeritus of the Diocese, presided. A total of 49 members of the organization died in the two years since the last Memorial Mass. Each was prayed for by name during the Mass.**

## Office of Religious Ed relies on Appeal gifts

(First of two parts)

**LAKE CHARLES** – Seeing to the effectiveness of religious education programs in the Diocese by providing resources and guidance to coordinators and directors of religious education in the parishes and Catholic schools is the main focus of the Diocesan Office of Religious Education and its director, Denise Donahoe, although now “Whole Community Catechesis” is beginning to draw a great deal of attention.

This office, like all others of the Diocese, relies in no small measure on the Diocesan Services Appeal, formerly known as the Bishop’s Services Appeal, which began the weekend of Nov. 4-5. Your contributions to the Appeal make the administration of all Diocesan programs more effective, enabling more people to take part.

Donahoe, who has worked with Religious Education at the Diocesan level and with the Office of Catholic Schools since 1998, became the director in 2002. Her background as a special educator in the public schools for 10 years and then as Religious Education coordinator at Immaculate Conception Cathedral School for 11 more gave her a good background to work with one foot in schools and one in parishes as Associate Director of Religious Education.

As Associate Director, Donahoe worked with parishes and schools as well becoming involved with Adult Religious Education. “I didn’t do RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) and things like that, but I taught Holy Cross College classes and facilitated Loyola and worked on the certification process with Sandy Gay. We didn’t get the certification process 100 percent going until the last year before becoming director,” Donahoe said, currently in her fourth year.

“Between my associate director years and director years I could see the need for adult training,” she continued. “It seemed like the key for kids in the school program being successful depended on how well trained, not only in the faith but in methodology and spirituality, those who were catechizing the students were. There was also a big push for adult education around the country. Everywhere I go nationally, regionally, and locally that is the buzz. Everybody is recognizing that this is really where we need to go.”

Even the speaker at the recent Catechetical Conference sponsored by the Diocese of Lake Charles and held at St. Louis Catholic High School made mention of the idea. According to Donahoe, he said, “should we really attempt to do things differently than Jesus, or we should we model ourselves after Jesus, who taught adults and blessed children. He wasn’t advocating that we not teach children but that we need to teach the adults.”

The certification program for teachers in Catholic schools and at the parish level has been one way of moving forward with adult education.

“We have been able to get certification going for parish ministry where we have not had it before,” Donahoe said. “That was one of the things that Sandy had asked me to concentrate on. We have basic, intermediate, and master levels of certification for catechists. In the school system, the Master Catechist is the minimum level we want the teachers to reach.”

The Office provides access to extension courses from Holy Cross College and Loyola University, both in New Orleans, to that end.

“The certifications at the parish level can involve workshops, breakout sessions at conferences, and one on one sessions that can be parish based,” Donahoe continued. “We try to make them as doable for anyone no matter what distance they are from the Diocesan See or how accessible they are. They can take a video and work by themselves, if necessary. Everyone has access to it. We want to make it available to as many people as possible.”

Another aspect that Donahoe has become deeply involved with was an advocate for Catholics in the community with

special needs.

“We had parents and advocates for those with special needs that they weren’t feeling part of the church, feeling alienated, who came to us for assistance,” Donahoe said.

The need that surfaced came from individuals with special needs children, some with Attention Deficit or Hyper Activity Disorder as well as those with Autism, who weren’t being accommodated in their parishes. “It was perhaps for a lack of knowing what to do with those children on the part of the parish, either the pastor or ushers at Mass and even the coordinators and directors of religious education in the parish,” Donahoe said.

“Some of them had really bad experiences with priests or ushers telling them they needed to take their child out because they were creating a distraction,” she continued. “They felt that they were being told that ‘if you object to my child you are objecting to me.’”

St. Louis Catholic High School became the site for “special needs” Masses in 2002.

“The long term goal is to see those parents and children receive what they need in their own church parish,” Donahoe said. “We have made several inroads. At the same time we are trying to meet their needs by having Masses at St. Louis to build up their own worth and esteem and recognition of healing the gap that they were feeling with the church.”

“So we tried to do that with our masses, rebuild their sense of community, their sense of worthiness and at the same time trying to build the structure in the parishes as to how they can accommodate their own.”

Donahoe has begun setting up a network and providing resources to the parishes.

“We are trying to find ways to work with all kinds of children, in as least restrictive a way as possible, where we can make them feel a part of the church,” she said.

Donahoe has been working with Kathy King, a special education teacher at Our Lady Queen of Heaven Catholic School, who works with the special needs team. “She has been my resource to evaluate and sometimes do one on one work with students who cannot be accommodated in the parish settings, either because they are so in need of special help, that they need a special educator to do it or because there is no one who can be surfaced in the parish that is able at that time to do it,” she said. “Slowly and surely we are finding people to do more in their parish. St. Raphael in Iowa was one last year that had a child receive first communion, being trained one-on-one by someone in the parish and received the sacrament in the parish. That is our long-term goal to get that accessible everywhere.”

Donahoe was also involved with the beginning of the Diocesan wide eighth grade retreat program. “Each Church has its own retreats for students but there was a feeling that there was a need for them to look at the larger church, of them coming together to see what we have in common,” she said. “That we should be more in collaboration between the schools rather than in competition. That is where they usually see each other, academically or with sports.”

These retreats continue, now at St. Louis Catholic High School. “We wanted them to see themselves as all one,” Donahoe continued. “Since we are trying to attract students to the high school it is a win-win. It’s not the territory of any one of the elementary schools.”

The gifts made to the annual Appeal by the many generous Catholics in the Diocese of Lake Charles make it possible for the programs of this Local Church to continue. Please remember the many people who are aided by the ministries offered by the Diocese and consider your own gift, whether large or small, to the 2006-2007 Diocesan Services Appeal.

## Father Whitney Miller has his own “Join Up” experience

**LAKE CHARLES** – Father Whitney Miller continues to wear many hats. Following a January to July 2006 sabbatical, he returned to his roles as Director of Diocesan Counseling Services and as Rector of St. Louis Catholic High School, with an office at the corner of Seventh and Bank Streets. Recently he was appointed Administrator of St. Henry Parish.

Father Miller, who was the first priest ordained by Bishop Jude Speyrer for the Diocese of Lake Charles, celebrated his 25th anniversary in June 2005.

At that time it had been 12 years since Father Miller came back to the Diocese from earning a Masters Degree in Expressive Therapy and a Ph.D. in Pastoral Psychology.

During that time he was working at a treatment center for priests near St. Louis, Mo., and kept seeing a particular issue raised by some of his clients.

“The issue underneath the presenting issue was their relationship with their bishops, particularly as related to the promise of obedience that we make as diocesan priests,” Father Miller said. “Some struggled with that.”

“I was doing that work with these priests and at the same time I began to read about Monty Roberts, who is better known because of the movie of the title ‘The Horse Whisperer’ (as well as a book of the same name),” Father Miller said. “Basically, Monty Roberts took a very old traditional method of training horses that was called ‘breaking’ the horse into submission and he translated and revised it to a new form he calls ‘Join Up.’”

Father Miller was intrigued by the similarities between Roberts’ training of horses and the manner that some priests see their relationship with their Bishop.

“Even the theological words were the same - ‘submission’ and ‘community join up,’” he continued. “It kind of caught my eye right away.”

Father Miller kept reading about Roberts and his method after his return to the Diocese in 1996 when he became Director of Counseling Services. A few years passed and the onset of his 25th anniversary of ordination brought the idea more into focus.

“I recognized my 25 year anniversary was coming up and could request a sabbatical,” Father Miller said. “Initially I wanted to go out there (Roberts’ ‘Flag Is Up Farm’ in Solvang, California) and study with him to try to make connections between the relationship between the horse and the trainer and the relationship between a bishop and his priests.”

“I thought there was some need for updating of the theological stance of how I think some bishops have viewed the promise of obedience as a way of breaking a priest into submission,” Father Miller continued. “You get the priest to do what you want them to but you lose their spirit. If a priest’s spirit is broken they are not much good for anything and could end up in a treatment center.”

“I was trying to see how that could translate into theological language, saying ‘What would join up look like in the relationship between a bishop and priests?’” Fr. Miller continued.

Father Miller contacted Roberts and the trainer was very interested in his proposal. “A lot of people have asked how



**Father Miller and Taz**

did I meet him,” Father Miller laughed. “I just wrote to him and told him what I was interested in, that I had read some of his stuff and that I was a priest. He wrote back right away, in fact he called me as I had given him my phone number. He was very flattered. He is Roman Catholic. Two nuns had been significant in his life almost as a turning point, supporting him at a time when he needed it. He had never had a priest out at the farm. So he said ‘I would love for you to come.’ He pretty much opened the door for me.”

So it was off to California for Father Miller.

“He was marvelous to me,” Father Miller said. “I shadowed him for the seven weeks I was there. Followed him around and watched him train horses. He has a school, and students who are studying with him. I watched him work with them, ate lunch with him, and lots of times had dinner with him. During those time periods, he would say, ‘do you have any questions about what you saw today?’ I would always take notes, taking down his quotes and everything.”

“During that time I was doing some preliminary writing, and I would give them to him to make sure I was understanding his terminology and he would critique it and give it back.”

Father Miller also sent his preliminary drafts off to three Bishops, asking them that if he published something like this to Bishops, would they read it.

“I was very pleased with their honesty,” Father Miller continued. “They wrote me back and said, ‘No, they probably won’t read it.’”

“Then I had to shift things around,” he said. Following his time with Roberts, Father Miller spent Lent at St. Benedict Monastery in Covington, La.

“During those 40 days, I prayed about what I would do. I took my experience with Join Up and I shifted my focus from writing it for bishops to writing it for the folks in the pews. The work I have is called ‘Horse Sense for Holy People: A Spirituality of Join Up.’”

“I used Lent in that great monastic setting, where there is

so much time for quiet prayer, reflection, and reading, for writing. I prayed and lived the life of a monk.”

After Easter Father Miller sent what he had written to Roberts and asked that he continue to read it.

The final portion of his sabbatical Father Miller spent with friends in New Zealand sharpening his manuscript.

“Now I have this manuscript and I’m not sure what I’m going to do with it,” he said. “So much of it is Monty’s thoughts, I can’t really publish it without his approval. So, it is still with him.”

During his stay with Roberts, Father Miller feels he learned much from the horses and Roberts.

“I learned a lot from watching Monty work with humans,” Father Miller continued. “I went out there really to watch him work with horses, but I learned equally as much watching him work with humans. He has been able to use the same theories and techniques and strategies of what works well with a horse, and apply it to human beings. The same understanding and comfortability and respect that he has for horses is how he treats the people he works with.”

Many of the things Father Miller learned apply to spiritual life, he noted. “I think that will stay with me and the people I see for counseling and spiritual direction will be inflicted with that insight as well.”

Father Miller even had his own “join up” experience.

“I did it after being there for five weeks,” Father Miller said. “The previous way of training a horse took four to six weeks and was very abusive.”

“Monty’s method of ‘join up’ takes him 28 minutes and you get the same result,” Father Miller said, “but the horse retains its spirit and will do anything for you.”

While not quite as efficient Father Miller was quite pleased with his time.

“When I did my join up it took 36 minutes,” he said. “The horse’s name is Taz, short for Tasmanian Devil. The priest and the devil. They thought that was cute to put the two of us together.”

The process is very ritualistic, according to Father Miller and each horse is different so you have to have some flexibility involved.

“You establish dominance but you let the horse know you trust them,” Father Miller said. “It was the neatest thing. Afterward, every time Taz would see me he would come up to me. We were big partners.”

Father Miller now looks back at his sabbatical as something he will carry with him for many years.

“I feel good about the five month sabbatical in that I now have something that will always be with me to recall,” he said. “Ten, 15 or 20 years from now I will look back on this reflective account of my five months and what I learned from it spiritually.”

“My opening line (in the manuscript) is ‘I went to Flag Is Up Farms to learn more about horses and Join Up and I came away with what the horses taught me about being human and holiness,’” Father Miller continued.

(This page paid for by the Diocese of Lake Charles.)