

Bishop James McHugh, R.I.P.

Faith and New Works

By Bishop William Murphy

When first I met Msgr. James McHugh, I was the Under Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in the Holy See. He was a priest of Newark who served at the United States Conference of Bishops and as well at the Holy See Mission to the United Nations. While I do not recall the details of our very first meeting, I do remember clearly the tone and the substance of the times we were together in those early years as we came to know, respect and like each other. The tone was serious. The substance was issue oriented and very rewarding for me.

What I discovered about Jim McHugh was how very bright and how very knowledgeable he truly was. His field at first was sociology with an expertise in family issues. To that he added a doctorate in theology which gave to his sociological qualifications a depth and a conviction that made him the most formidable person the Holy See could send to any of the myriad of United Nations' agencies that dealt with family issues, population questions, and the whole range of social issues about which he knew more than anyone else in the room.

As our friendship grew, I would see him often in Rome when he would come as an expert for the Council on the Family and again for the Council for the Laity. We met now as much as friends as men who worked in related and interdisciplinary fields. He was no less committed in his friendships than he was in the areas of his professional competencies. Yet in friendship one could see the quiet humor, the wry smile, the engaging wit that made an evening with him a relaxing and refreshing experience. Over

pasta or a simple piece of fish and a glass of wine, we could solve most of the world's problems aided by his sharp intelligence and humorous asides.

When I heard he was to be auxiliary bishop of Newark, I was at first surprised. The rumors had been around but to me he seemed such a natural as one of the Holy See's most respected voices on the international stage. I thought the Holy Father would have preferred to keep him in those roles. What the Pope knew, and we all would soon discover, was the fact that the now Bishop McHugh always had the heart of a shepherd. Yes, he was quiet, unassuming and even reserved, but he was always a man whose first and last desire was to be a priest for people and a servant of the mysteries of God's grace.

That was what the people of God in Camden discovered when he became their shepherd after the Holy Father sent him there as diocesan bishop in 1989. He loved Camden and became an integral part of that community. Characteristically he knew more about it in no time than did people who had lived there all their lives. He now would speak of Camden as the point of reference of our conversations and get-togethers. He didn't do it to turn the spotlight on his diocese. It was just that he knew it so well and embraced it so totally that he could offer lessons on all kinds of issues by reference to Camden.

In the meantime he never ceased to be the most credible voice in the United States in defense of life. As Cardinal Law said in his funeral homily, no churchman, and certainly no U.S. bishop, did more for the pro-life cause than Bishop McHugh. As a young priest on the staff at the Bishops' Conference he was the one who organized and developed the earliest pro-life plans of the U.S. bishops after *Roe v. Wade*. His ideas were the central and guiding ones in all the bishops' efforts. He personally was always there to inspire and

exhort, to explain and to move forward every project and initiative that would turn the tide back to respect for life from the moment of conception to natural death.

All that he brought here to the Diocese of Rockville Centre. At the end of 1998, Pope John Paul II sent him here to Long Island when our dear Bishop John McGann asked for a coadjutor. To this, one of the largest dioceses in the United States, the Holy Father sent one of the most respected voices of the American hierarchy. He came here, as he did to Camden, to be shepherd to the People of God. First as Bishop McGann's coadjutor and then from January 21, 2000 as diocesan bishop, he sought to know and love this diocese as he had known and loved the people of every other place he had served. There should have been at least seven to ten years for him to lead this diocese. The Lord had other plans. Almost from the beginning, there had developed the cancer that would take him from us on December 10, 2000, a year ago next Monday.

When I joined you in Rockville Centre for his funeral last December, I never dreamed that I would be sent by the Holy Father to succeed him. I went with Bishop McGann and the other bishops from the Cathedral to the Seminary in Huntington to inter a dear friend in his place of rest. With you I continue to mourn his loss. With you I will offer Mass for him on Monday, Dec. 10 at 12:10 in the Cathedral of Saint Agnes. He is a lasting legacy of blessing for this diocese. Together we commend him to God's love and we thank God for who he was, for all he gave to the Church in the United States and around the world and, especially, for the loving care he gave this Church of Rockville Centre.