



By Jan Schultz

The Imperial Republican

As a convert to the Catholic faith at the age of 20, Bishop James Conley didn't even think he could become a priest, let alone a Bishop.

That was one detail members of St. Patrick Catholic Church learned Saturday about their new Bishop, the ninth for the Lincoln Diocese, which includes all of southern Nebraska, south of the Platte River.

Bishop Conley was installed in Lincoln on Nov. 20, 2012, moving to Nebraska from Denver, where he had served as Auxiliary Bishop for the Denver Diocese.

In his six months as Bishop, he said he's visited two-thirds of the parishes, and is getting to know the vast Diocese.

"The Diocese of Lincoln is a great Diocese," he told a group of 35 after a luncheon at the parish hall.

"And, not just because of its vocations, but because of its Catholic life, its fidelity to the Church and its school system," he said.

The Kansas native mentioned vocations because the seminary in the Lincoln Diocese, St. Gregory the Great in Seward, is filled and another wing needs to be built for the church's training of future priests.

He also noted four orders of Catholic Sisters are active in the Diocese, and their ranks are growing, too.

Bishop Conley noted the strength of vocations here is "a tribute to my predecessors, those before me who had foresight. I'm humbled to inherit this Diocese as Bishop," he said.

However, not everything is perfect, he added, including the issue of those who have fallen away from the church. But a "new evangelization" is underway to reach those places, he said, especially in the United States, where God's Word has been heard but has been lost.

Talking of his own conversion to Catholicism, Bishop Conley said he probably would consider himself previously as an agnostic before being introduced to the faith as a college student in Kansas. His two roommates were Catholic, and he was recruited to take a roommate's girlfriend to Catholic instruction classes.

Listening to the instruction, he said he found it difficult to contradict the historical succession of the church that goes back to Jesus himself through Apostolic succession.

"It's still the same church, the same Mass, the same sacraments. That was it for me," he said.

He traces his vocation to the priesthood back to seeing Pope John Paul II in October 1979 in Des Moines, Iowa, just after graduating from college. The pope asked the young people attending if they had considered the priesthood.

"I had never thought of it before," he said.

He met Fr. Bernard Lorenz, pastor of St. Patrick in Imperial, during seminary training in Kentucky.

"And the rest is history," he smiled.

Bishop Conley spent three days in southwest Nebraska last week, visiting nine Catholic

parishes in a three-day whirlwind “western swing.”

His day in Imperial started early Saturday with 6:15 a.m. prayer followed by a nearly two-mile run/bike ride with several parishioners.

Bishop Conley, an avid runner, chose the pavement. He recently completed the Lincoln Marathon in early May.

Following breakfast, he toured the St. Isidore Gift & Thrift at its current 746 Broadway location and its new site being remodeled at 527 Broadway.

Following lunch in Imperial, he traveled to Wauneta, where he celebrated a 4 p.m. Mass that included dedication of a new altar at St. John’s Catholic Church.

Imperial, Grant and Benkelman, three of the communities the Bishop visited last week, are the furthest west in the Diocese. He also visited other parishes in Grant, Palisade, Trenton, Stratton, Elsie and Wallace.