

Most Reverend Paul Peter Rhode
(1915-1945)

Perhaps the letter sent to Bishop Stanislaus Bona on March 5, 1945 by John Goodland, Jr., Mayor of Appleton, two days after the death of Bishop Paul Rhode, captured the deep love and respect so many people had for the sixth Bishop of Green Bay after serving so faithfully in the diocese for nearly 30 years:

We realize to the fullest extent the benefits which your Diocese and the entire community have derived from the work of this Christian-minded and public-spirited man. The warm and personal feelings for inspiration which he gave to many hearts by his kindly and unselfish life will be a solace to many in years to come.

Likewise, on the joyous occasion of Bishop Rhode's Silver Jubilee of coming to the Diocese of Green Bay, Monsignor Joseph Marx, Vicar General and toastmaster for the event, shared:

...We, the diocese of Green Bay, are like a bee hive. When Bishop Rhode came to us at the behest of the Supreme Pontiff, Pope Benedict XV, there was also among us a joyous acclaim. For when a bishop is with us, we have life, we have union with the Church.

In this memorable talk, he compared the coming of the Bishop Jubilarian to the Diocese of Green Bay as "a renewal of the spiritual nuptial vows pronounced first on March 3, 1868."

The personal episcopal shield of Bishop Rhode featured the motto "*Vias tuas, Domine, edoce me*" (Your ways, O Lord, teach me thoroughly). It guided him to do what was needed for the diocese. To his shield he added the diocesan motto "*Sicut platanus juxta aquam* (Like a tree planted close by the water)." In the words of Monsignor Marx:

"And beside the waters of Green Bay whose bosom bore the canoes and whose forests echoed to the preachments of the saintly missionaries these many years ago, this plane tree was planted. This plane tree flourished in the sight of man, and, we pray, also in the sight of God."

Paul Peter Rhode was born September 16, 1871 in Wejherowe, Prussian Poland. Even though his father, August, died when Paul was only one year old, his mother, Christine Kerschbaum, brought her son to America six years later and settled in Chicago. The future bishop graduated from St. Stanislaus School in Chicago before attending St. Mary College in Kentucky, St. Ignatius College in Chicago, and St. Francis Seminary in Milwaukee. On June 17, 1894 he was ordained a priest by Milwaukee Archbishop Frederick Katzer (earlier Bishop of Green Bay) for the Archdiocese of Chicago.

Father Rhode's first three priestly assignments in Chicago were as Assistant Pastor, St. Adalbert; Pastors, Ss. Peter and Paul; and Pastor, St. Michael. In 1908, at the young age of 36, Father Rhode was chosen as Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago and was consecrated at Holy Name Cathedral in Chicago on July 29 of that year. Just seven years later on July 5, 1915 he succeeded Bishop Joseph Fox as Bishop of Green Bay until 1945.

During his nearly 30 years as chief shepherd, Bishop Rhode saw the Catholic population in the diocese grow from about 147,000 to 193,000.

Among the very many significant achievements of Bishop Rhode as Bishop of the Diocese of Green Bay are the following:

- Founded ten new parishes and 19 new parochial schools;
- Planned and enhanced the organization of the Diocesan Charities and the Diocesan Department of Education;
- Oversaw the rebuilding and modernizing of the St. Joseph Orphanage which he visited at least weekly and was called "Father Bishop";
- Promulgated the new diocesan statutes following the Fourth Diocesan Synod held in December 1920 and set up 14 deaneries;
- Reorganized the Leo Benevolent Association on behalf of sick and retired diocesan priests;
- Launched successfully a Diocesan Charities Campaign in 1921;
- Concluded an agreement with the United States Government whereby the grounds and buildings of the Indian School (Guardian Angels) became the property of the diocese;
- Promoted the McCormick Home for the Aged in Green Bay (it was acquired through the generosity of Sarah and Amelia McCormick), the Crippled Children's Home at Robinsonville and the Catholic Girls' Camp at Loon Lake;
- Oversaw a new home for infants and a power plant on the diocesan grounds in 1929 (the buildings would later be known as the St. Joseph Home for Children [Melania Hall] and Bosco Hall);
- Set up the central Diocesan Office for the Holy Name Societies and the Propagation of the Faith Society;

Monsignor Orville Griese (who served the Diocese of Green Bay for many years in various positions, including Vice-Chancellor, founding Rector of Sacred Heart Seminary (1953), pastor and earlier biographer of all of our Bishops through the time of Bishop Bona) aptly characterized the multifaceted leadership of Bishop Rhode with these significant words in the 1983 edition of *In His Vineyard*:

Few prelates of his day could equal Bishop Rhode in dignity of manner and personal appearance. He was every inch the Bishop, everywhere and at all times. The same admirable quality characterized his public sermons and informal talks, so that he usually gave the most memorable discourse at any assemblage of speakers. His mastery of phrase and diction, without benefit of script or memorized message,

made the English language a powerful ally for him in the exercise of his episcopal responsibilities. An equally dignified sense of good humor preserved this paternal bishop from any taint of ivory-tower civility. His practice of administering the Sacrament of Confirmation Sunday after Sunday was but one indication of his full-time dedication to the duties of his high office.

When Bishop Rhode came to the diocese in 1915 there were 165 diocesan priests and when he died on March 3, 1945 (the same day the Diocese of Green Bay was established by Pope Pius IX in 1868), there were 230 diocesan priests.

In the funeral sermon delivered by his successor, Bishop Bona reminded those present that the activities of Bishop Rhode were not limited to diocesan responsibilities. For example, Bishop Rhode served for many years as a member of the Board of Governors of the Catholic Church Extension Society, which provided so much aid for the needs of the missionary dioceses in our country. Despite his failing health, he also supported many other Catholic organizations, including the recently formed Catholic League for Religious Assistance to the Church in Poland

Because of continuing ill health, on December 2, 1944, Bishop Bona was assigned as Coadjutor to succeed him as the seventh Bishop of Green Bay. On March 3, 1945, Bishop Rhode died at the age of 74 at Mercy Hospital in Oshkosh. He was laid to rest near the entrance to Allouez Cemetery in Green Bay.

Father James P. Massart