NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Remembering a shepherd on conclave eve

Thomas C. Fox | Mar. 11, 2013 NCR Today

Tens of thousands of words have been written about the cardinals and candidates who will be entering the conclave tomorrow at the Vatican. One of these men will almost certainly emerge as our next pope.

I hope he is a good man, an honest person who will live transparently and run a transparent church. I hope his reach will have no bounds, embracing all the sinners and saints who make up the human family. I hope he will be merciful and will restrain from judgments.

The next man we call our Holy Father will be deluged with serious challenges. He cannot quickly respond to them all. But he can offer us fresh hope, most immediately through the use of symbols, symbols meant to send messages across the world, symbols intended to empower, to liberate and to offer fresh hope.

If our new pontiff needs a shepherding model I would offer him the late Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw, Michigan, who died nine years ago this month. Untener fostered love, hope and encouragement. He reminded us we should never be overwhelmed by the problems of the world. He told us God is at work, always doing something new.

Once in March, 1991, Untener issued a decree that for the next four months all meetings held under church auspices, at the parish or diocesan level, no matter what their purpose, must begin with one agenda item: How shall the action or decision affect or involve the poor? The decree was in effect for 97 days. He found those days among the richest of his ministry.

?When the 97 days had ended, I asked myself, ?Is it all over? Can we now get back to normal??
Yes. We can get back to normal by realizing that ?normal? means talking about the poor at normal meetings, and finding ways to translate our words into actions. ?Normal? means focusing on the poor as much as Jesus did.?

By now most *NCR* readers have prayed the prayer attributed to Oscar Romero. Maybe most also know by now that Romero never spoke the words of that prayer.

They were, in fact, spoken by John Cardinal Dearden in November of 1979. They come from a homily he gave at a Mass for deceased priests. Those words were words drafted for Dearden by Untener.

So now, as we wait for our cardinals to get on with their work, let?s pray they choose a man who will foster hope, preach liberation and will remain focused on the poor.

In this spirit let's remember the words Untener wrote some 35 years back:

> It helps now and then to step back and take the long view. The reign of God is not only beyond our efforts. It is beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying the reign of God

always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the church's mission. We cannot do everything but there is a sense of liberation in realizing that because this enables us to do something and to do it well. It may be incomplete but it is a beginning, a step along the way, and an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.

Source URL (retrieved on *07/10/2014 - 11:56*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/remembering-shepherd-conclave-eve