



Fuquay-Varina

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FUQUAY-VARINA, NORTH CAROLINA

Mayor Byrne to receive papal honor

By Shirley Hayes
Correspondent

It was a phone call John Byrne will never forget. It left him in tears, happy, humbling tears.

It was Bishop Michael Burbidge calling. "I have some very good news for you," the bishop of the Raleigh Diocese of North Carolina said to Byrne.

Then he explained that Byrne, a lifelong Catholic and one of the founders of St. Bernadette's Catholic Church in Fuquay-Varina, will be receiving papal honors in the form of the Benemerenti Medal for dedicated service to the church.

The medal is the highest honor bestowed by the Catholic Church on a lay person. Only the Pope can award such an honor. The English translation of Benemerenti is "well deserved."

Bishop Burbidge will present the medal to Byrne at a service Dec. 6 at the St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church in Cary. Fifteen others from the Raleigh Diocese covering the eastern half of North Carolina will receive a similar award. Four others will receive the Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice Cross, another papal honor awarded to clergy.

A nomination for papal honors is made by the Bishop of a Diocese; it must be approved by the Cardinal of the United States then forwarded to the Vatican where the Pope must approve it.

Awards such as these are presented every six to seven years, according to Frank Morock of the Raleigh Diocese office.

When he heard the Bishop's message over the phone back in October, Byrne said his instant reply was, "I think you've got the wrong person."

Bishop Burbidge

assured him he had not.

Then, as the Bishop explained the full significance of the award and the manner in which recipients are selected, Byrne became emotional. "I felt the presence of my parents," he said in an interview. Both parents are now deceased. "I felt my father holding my hand and my mother hugging me," he said. "I cried."

Some special memories from his growing up years have come sharply into focus for Byrne since the Benemerenti award was announced. He appreciates that he grew up in the small town of Wake Forest and in the Catholic Church.

Most of the population of the town was Baptist. Byrne remembers five or six families in the Catholic Church. Children didn't think much about denominations, as Byrne remembers it. Everybody went to church and sometimes children invited friends to each others' church events. Byrne loved the small town and the sense of community. In later years it was that appreciation that influenced the decision he and wife, Patty, made to live in Fuquay-Varina.

Both became active in the community and later in St. Bernadette's Catholic Church which they helped start.

As he visits childhood memories, Byrne remembers a Saturday morning when he was about eight, his sister a bit younger, and their father called them to watch a movie on television entitled "The Song of Bernadette." Byrne wasn't really interested. He wanted to go outside and play, but he stayed.

It is the story of a young French girl who claimed to have seen a vision of the Virgin Mary several times in a grotto near Lourdes. No one else could see it.



CONTRIBUTED
John Byrne is one of the founders of St. Bernadette's Catholic Church and will be receiving papal honors in the form of the Benemerenti Medal for dedicated service to the church.

The girl, who was ridiculed and shunned by many, later became a nun. As time passed, some came to believe the water from a spring in the grotto had healing powers and visitors flocked to the town of Lourdes to see for themselves. Years after her death, Bernadette's story was investigated by the church and she was canonized. Watching the movie version of her story, the young John was disturbed by the fact that Bernadette could see the vision (movie audiences could too) but the townspeople of Lourdes could not.

John said he jumped up, went to the TV screen and begged the onlookers at the sight of "Look up, Look up. She's there."

His memories of church related experiences and lessons from his parents also called to mind a time when Byrne was 10 to 12 and had his own lawn-mowing business. One day his father suggested that, while he was up the street doing the yard of a customer, why didn't he cross the street and cut the grass at the church. He did it readily and, at his Dad's request, again the second week. The third

time the elder Byrne reminded his son not to forget about the church yard, John hesitated. "I haven't been paid for the first two mowing jobs," he complained. That led to a parental lesson on giving.

Pushing to get a church started.

The first obstacle Byrne and his parishioners encountered in the 1980's was that priests in the area were carrying heavy loads, and Byrne remembers being told he would have to find a priest willing to come to Fuquay-Varina to hold services. His early efforts failed. But when some changes were made in the Garner church, a new priest there agreed to come.

A search for space led Byrne to rent, on behalf of the small congregation, the lower level of Trinity Episcopal Church south of town for Saturday night services. Word spread to the few Catholic families in town. Soon St. Bernadette became a mission church. It was a big step forward for the small group.

Still Byrne and others continued the push for a church building in Fuquay-Varina. Eventually the Diocese began talking of a new church in southern Wake County, but the leadership leaned toward a location between Fuquay-Varina and Garner. Byrne, who had been raising money for a church, still lobbied for his town. He was pleased that many donations to the effort—he estimates a third—came from community leaders who were not Catholic.

Byrne had one staunch ally in all his efforts to get a Catholic church here. The late Myrtle Hopson, long a fifth grade teacher in Fuquay-Varina, who had driven to Garner to attend a Catholic church for years, quietly backed Byrne and St. Bernadette's.

As discussions continued on the subject of location for a new church, Mrs. Hopson offered to give a 10-acre tract of land on Wilbon Road to the Diocese.

Byrne pointed out that the purchase of land would take just about all the money that had been raised for a church. Mrs. Hopson's offer was accepted. St. Bernadette's built its first all-purpose building on the Hopson land in 1988.

The congregation soon outgrew it. Byrne found local churches of other denominations willing to share their facilities when St. Bernadette's needed room for youth activities. Once again Byrne found a sense of community.

Soon a push was on at St. Bernadette's to move forward on a church building.

St. Bernadette's Catholic Church on Wilbon Road was completed in 2001. It could seat 600. The church has since been enlarged with the addition of two wings to seat 1200. "It is now one of largest churches in the Raleigh Diocese," Byrne says.

A statement issued by the office of Bishop Burbidge concerning the Benemerenti Award reads, "In making the nomination of Mr. Byrne to Pope Benedict XVI, Bishop Burbidge cited Mr. Byrne's great leadership in the founding of St. Bernadette Parish with 50 fellow parishioners in 1987. Mr. Byrne has served either as the chairman or as a member of every building committee since the erection of the parish and has served on the parish Finance Council for over twenty years. He has also served most notably in bringing St. Bernadette's Anglo parishioners and its immigrant Hispanic parishioners into greater unity."