*The following article originally appeared in the Catholic Key, the newspaper for the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph. It is reprinted here with permission from the editor.*

KANSAS CITY — Nothing improves a walk on the beach like a fruitful dialogue with the King of Kings!

Monsignor Robert Gregory, a priest of our diocese for 40 years and currently rector of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in downtown Kansas City, was born in St. Joseph in October 1943 and raised in St. Joseph's parish in Easton. The tenth of eleven children — "It was a very Catholic family," he says — he had ample time to discern God's plan for his life while working at solitary tasks on the farm.

"A religious vocation was very common in our family," he says. "Two of my older sisters are Benedictines in Atchison. Then a very good friend started at St. John's seminary when I was 14, and that started me thinking about that."

Msgr. Gregory received a high school diploma from St. John's in 1961 and spent the next eight years at Conception Abbey major seminary. "The priests and the monastic community were wonderful," he recalls. "Community living as it was lived at Conception Abbey was very attractive."

He liked Benedictine life at Conception so much that he considered joining the community. But gradually it became clear that God intended him to be a diocesan priest, and Bishop Charles Helmsing ordained Robert Gregory a priest on May 31, 1969 at St. Joseph's in Easton.

"Bishop Helmsing was filled with holiness. He always treated me as a true spiritual father," Msgr. Gregory says.

But it was a bad time to be a Catholic priest, perhaps especially so for a young, gifted and brand-new priest straight from the seminary. Some older priests were leaving the priesthood. An

unfortunate few left the Church altogether.

“It made me think, why am I any different? Will this happen to me? They entered with zeal as I did and six, seven, ten years later they were leaving. So I was filled with doubt.”

“These were very, very difficult years in the Church and in society,” he continues. “We had the perfect storm of Vietnam. Dr. Martin Luther King was killed. And the third source of turmoil was from the beginnings of implementing the Second Vatican Council.”

Pope Paul VI’s July 1968 encyclical “Humanae Vitae” was perhaps the most controversial thing of all. It reaffirmed Catholic teaching against artificial birth control, and foresaw with disconcerting clarity the social consequences of ignoring this teaching. Yet at the time, Humanae Vitae was widely criticized inside the Church, and only added to the Church’s growing chaos.

“Cardinal Boyle in Washington made every priest in his diocese swear allegiance to it. Quite a few wouldn’t do it. It was the perfect storm brewing in the Church,” Msgr. Gregory says.

Meanwhile, newly ordained Father Gregory was assigned to a parish where the pastor and assistant pastor were the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor of the diocese. Their young assistant taught in the grade school, taught at a diocesan high school, and served as chaplain for a large local hospital — all while functioning as a full-time priest in a large parish.

“I was very lonely and after a lot of prayer, discernment and with Bishop Helmsing’s blessing I left four years to the month after ordination to get my head together,” Msgr. Gregory recalls.

“But I never turned my back on the Church. I went regularly to Confession and went to Mass and prayed the Breviary every day that I could.”

He held a series of good jobs in Washington, Tennessee and finally San Diego — where a walk

on the beach in 1976 would change his life.

On that walk, “Christ spoke to me in a dialogue that took place in my heart,” Msgr. Gregory says.

“He said, ‘Robert, are you happy?’ and I said ‘No, not really.’ ‘Why aren’t you happy? I’ve given you everything you wanted. You had good jobs, you bought and sold a house in Washington. You have all the freedom you desired.

‘But you’re still not happy. Why don’t you let Me make you happy by giving yourself to Me completely?’”

“I said, ‘How do I know I can trust you? What if you disappoint me?’ He said to me, ‘I died for you, didn’t I?’ So I said, ‘All right.’”

“That call of love has been repeated over and over in my priesthood. It’s a call to trust.”

Everything had changed for Father Gregory when he returned to active duty as a priest at Christmas of 1976. “What makes him such a wonderful priest, to me, is that we know he has the same human frailties that we have. He’s not holier than thou,” says Cathedral parish council chairman Ed Blasco.

“He absolutely walks the walk.”

“I think his adult personality reflects growing up in a very large farm family,” says Diocesan Chancellor Msgr. Bradley Offutt. “He’s not quick to pass negative judgments on people. He’s a wonderful respecter of persons. His strongest suit is perhaps his personal kindness.”

“Sometimes it seems like he’s burning the candle at both ends, he’s so giving,” says Cathedral finance council member Mike Henggler. “Once I watched him offer to help a guy who stopped him just before he processed down the aisle to start Mass. After Mass he did help him, too.”

“Since he’s been here we’ve done nothing but get better,” says Grand Knight John Parks of the Cathedral’s Knights of Columbus council. “He has helped bring community into the Cathedral. He seems to know instinctually what we need.”

“He’s been an extremely good boss,” says Deacon Steve Livingston. “I certainly consider him a mentor, and a good friend too. I feel privileged to work with him here.”

Forty years of pastoral experience have left Msgr. Gregory with one characteristic approach to parish management noted by many.

“If you ever need someone to pray over you, he’s the guy,” says pastoral council member and former parish administrator Gary Evans. “I say that because several times I’d bring issues to him and he’d say maybe we should just pray about it. And about two or three weeks later, our problem would be solved.”

“Where there’s a problem, the first thing he says is that we should pray about this. Someone else might just wring his hands, but Monsignor always just turns to God,” Blasco says.

“Again, it’s an example of walking the walk.”

“He’s such a humble servant. He truly listens to all of us, from his staff to his flock to the homeless man who comes to the door,” says Gail Monaco, the Cathedral’s long-time Executive Secretary. “He was just what the Cathedral needed.”

“I am convinced he was sent by God.”

“I believe in the grace of office, in that God always puts people in the positions He wants them to be in,” Msgr. Gregory says. “So I would say to any young man considering the priesthood: don’t let your human failures and weaknesses deter you. If you were perfect, He wouldn’t have called you.

“In spite of weakness, doubts and confusion I’ve had a very fulfilling and a very happy life as a priest. I hope to continue that for a while.”

*Msgr. Robert Gregory, second from left, poses at a Nov. 26, 2006, Solemn Vespers at the Cathedral of*