

A Cathedral to call home

In 1959, I was in my first year of high school in the Minor Seminary, St. Charles in Catonsville (now Charlestown). I was one of many in attendance at the opening Mass at the new Cathedral of Mary Our Queen. Little did I know then that I would spend more than 25 years of my priestly life living in the cathedral rectory!

In the seminary, we were taught to be “in the world but not of the world.” In my life at the cathedral, I have learned to be “in the rectory but not of the rectory staff.” I have celebrated various daily Masses at the cathedral but the vast majority of my ministry was “urbe et orbi,” “to the city and to the world.” My radio show aired on more than 300 stations for most of that time, and my preaching and retreat ministry took me around the country, mostly to parishes here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore and the surrounding areas of Washington, D.C., Delaware, Virginia and Pennsylvania.

In truth, my residency at the cathedral gave me the space to make those varied ministries possible. While I feel blessed with creative skills, I have virtually no practical or organizational skills. I often joke that: “If you give me a formless void, I’ll create a world for you, but I’ll probably forget where I put it!”

I have described my two rooms at the cathedral rectory as my “cave of creative clutter.” Some people have to organize their surroundings in order to organize their thoughts. I am mostly oblivious of my surroundings and live in the world of ideas.

So I have been wonderfully blessed to live with incredibly good and holy priests. I have often admired Monsignor Robert Armstrong’s ability to minister with grace in what is sometimes a “maelstrom of ministry,” whether the daily challenges of parish life or the extraordinary challenges of papal visits and major archdiocesan

celebrations. He has always done it with skill and a sense of humor.

In addition to the company of wonderful priests who have gone to various pastorates in the archdiocese, I have been blessed by the lay staff as well. The average person has no idea of the amount of work done on a daily basis by parish staff. The lay staff were always exceptionally kind to me, never making me feel like a “resident,” but always as part of the family.

The closeness of the Cathedral to the WPOC radio studio was a huge factor in my decision to ask to live there. Virtually every Monday night I would travel to the station, based in the Rotunda shopping center. There, from around 9 p.m. to midnight, I would go into the music vault and listen to songs, jot down lyrics and try to pick the right songs for the next show. I would then take those pieces of paper home, sort the music, write two scripts and tape them the following Monday with my engineer, Tony DiGirolamo.

Every week I had at least three major deadlines – scripts for the radio show, my weekly column in the Catholic Review and my weekly sermon.

Since I received no salary from the archdiocese, nor any money from the radio station, I had to be creative to find ways to pay my monthly rent. So I began a counseling practice, and accepted offers from parishes and groups for talks, retreats and preaching missions.

I always felt that if God wanted me to do this creative ministry, that God would find a way of providing for it. God has done that. Kind benefactors have been a blessing. Residence at the cathedral rectory has been part of that blessing. As someone said so wisely, “To live simply so that others could simply live.”

When people find that I live at the cathedral, I often get responses such as, “I graduated from there,” or “I went to an ordination there,” or “I attended a wonderful

Mass, or concert, or wedding.”

For most, the name cathedral recalls some wonderful moment or event. For me, for more than 25 years, cathedral has meant home.