

A Leader with Heart

Odds are that the 1,800 or so people who jammed the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Baltimore early in October will long remember the occasion, and the installation that day of Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien as the 15th Archbishop of Baltimore. That's true, I know, any time a bishop is welcomed to a new home. The ceremony is rich with tradition, and in the midst of solemn celebration there's often a festive air as well.

What set this day apart was the homily delivered by Archbishop O'Brien, a former New York priest, at the Mass of Installation. Almost from the beginning, it soared. It touched all the notes it should have: the palpable history of the place (Baltimore, established as a diocese in 1789, was the nation's first); a warm tribute to his predecessors; the role of the Church in working with the city, and in maintaining a commitment to the dream of Martin Luther King; the importance of adhering to Church teaching, especially on the fundamental issues of life; the necessity of addressing mutual concerns with those of other faiths; the need to ensure religious liberty for all; the heroism of those in the military who willingly defend our rights (Archbishop O'Brien spent 10 years as leader of the Military Archdiocese); and the overriding place of faith in human life.

Beyond the words themselves, this was a homily with heart. No one who heard the message doubted for a minute that the archbishop's commitment to all that he said was deep and intense. The words resonated because they were delivered with power and passion. Catholics throughout the archdiocese - indeed, everyone in Baltimore and across the state of Maryland - will soon recognize what the cathedral guests knew when they saw it that day: that Baltimore's new archbishop is a leader with heart.

Full disclosure requires me to tell you that I might be a bit prejudiced; Archbishop O'Brien is a long-time friend of The Christophers who faithfully supports our mission. But from what I saw, the city's media representatives were impressed with the archbishop too. For example, here's Jean Marbella, writing in the Baltimore Sun: "From using 'our' in reference to his new city, to bluntly noting the drugs, violence and poverty that beset it, O'Brien sent off signals loud and clear...This was a church

leader who would not retreat behind the cathedral doors but would emerge to mix it up a bit.”

Archbishop O’Brien, whose long-ago tour as a combat chaplain in Vietnam predated his work with the Military Archdiocese, had stirring words for today’s military people and their families. “Yours is a culture of generosity,” he said, “the likes of which has no equal in our land.” And when he offered the Church’s direct help to any woman with a crisis pregnancy (“No one has to have an abortion”), New Yorkers present heard an echo of their beloved Cardinal John O’Connor, whom Archbishop O’Brien served in many roles.

Those who were in Baltimore for the installation wondered aloud, in weekend conversations, whether the new archbishop would be filling a leadership role in the Church at large as well as within the archdiocese. It’s much too early, of course, to make even an educated guess. But the homily they heard at the installation ceremony itself hinted at marvelous things to come.

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