

Archbishop Lori calls four new transitional deacons to be ‘gentle in ministry’

A standing ovation that lasted nearly a minute was followed by a deadpan ad lib from the archbishop of Baltimore.

“They seem,” Archbishop William E. Lori said to four men ordained to the transitional diaconate, “to like you.”

That summed up the appreciation and outright love on display May 11 at Baltimore’s Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary for the four, who are on schedule to become priests of the Archdiocese of Baltimore in June 2020.

The pews reserved for Deacon Evan Ponton overflowed with family and friends from a journey that has taken him from St. Peter the Apostle in Libertytown to The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., to a stint on the staff of Church of the Nativity in Timonium, and finally back to St. Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore to finish his theology studies.

The crew for Deacon Zachary Crowley included John and Sue Wagner. Their son, Christopher, was a classmate of his at Fallston High, when the then-16-year-old lost his father, Walter, eight excruciating months after a botched surgery.

“College kids usually make the lasting cliques, but their group of high school boys kept in contact over the years,” John Wagner said. “It’s an interesting group. Zack has had a long, hard road. Like everyone else, we’re very proud of him.”

Deacon Brendan Fitzgerald's pastoral assignment for the first eight months of 2018 was St. Michael the Archangel in Overlea, where he was welcomed into a group of friends that includes the Borowy, Perry and Olkowski families.

"He walked right into our family group," Rebecca Perry said.

"Brendan is good at communicating with people, and meeting them where they are," Jen Olkowski said.

Deacon Jeremy Smith, at 42 the oldest of the four, said he was overwhelmed by all there was to take in, including U.S. Navy Cpt. Greg Smith, an older brother, and the iconic dome of the Baltimore Basilica.

"When I looked up and saw the symbol of the Holy Spirit (a dove), I couldn't help but have my eyes well up," Smith said. "All the sights and sounds, the true beauty (of the Basilica), and seeing my family, that all hit me."

The men sat with their families until called forward by Deacon Matthew Himes, who will be ordained to the priesthood June 22 along with Deacons Tyler Kline and Matthew DeFusco, who proclaimed the Gospel reading.

Archbishop Lori used his homily to offer encouragement and direction.

"In your charitable works, you are to bear effective witness to the Gospel by touching the lives of those in need with the healing balm of God's mercy," he said. "You won't be able to solve every problem or address every need, but you can accompany the poor and vulnerable with a transformative love. Thus you will effectively contribute to the building up of the body of Christ and to the strength and unity of this local church, the Archdiocese of Baltimore."

Later, he addressed the modern challenges of their calling.

“Your readiness to listen,” the archbishop said, “your patience in difficult situations, your willingness to build bridges and to avoid harsh and cynical speech, your rejection of all forms of clericalism - all this and more is what it means to be gentle in ministry after the example of Christ.

“Let me assure you, a gentle spirit may be precisely what will open the hearts of those who are disconnected from the church and alienated from others.”

After Father Steven Roth, director of vocations, testified “that they have been found worthy,” the four prostrated themselves during the litany of saints. Archbishop Lori then laid his hands on the heads of the four, conferring the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Father Robert Walsh (Crowley), Deacon Kline (Fitzgerald), Father Keith Boisvert (Ponton) and Father Charles Canterna (Smith) then vested them with the diaconal stole and dalmatic. Father Canterna, two weeks removed from sustaining serious neck injuries in an auto accident, was assisted by Conventual Franciscan Father Justin Ross, the archdiocese’s new delegate for religious.

The liturgy included Bishops Adam J. Parker, Mark E. Brennan and Denis J. Madden, and dozens of archdiocesan priests, from Father Robert Katafiasz, who was ordained just last December, to Monsignor Richard Tillman and Father Joseph O’Meara, who received the sacrament of holy orders in 1965 and 1967, respectively.

The first and second readings were offered by Little Sister of the Poor Lawrence Mary and Cynthia Fraga-Canadas, the latter in Spanish. Crowley and Fitzgerald, incidentally, are fluent in Spanish.

Their pastoral assignments for the summer will send Deacon Crowley to St. Isaac Jogues in Carney, Deacon Fitzgerald to New All Saints in Liberty Heights, Deacon Ponton to Holy Family in Randallstown and Deacon Smith to Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Essex.

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