

# Bishop-designate Brennan dedicated his priesthood to parish ministry

*Editor's Note: Bishops-designate Adam J. Parker and Mark E. Brennan will be ordained auxiliary bishops for the Archdiocese of Baltimore Jan. 19 at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Homeland. This story is part of a series of articles looking at their background and priestly ministry.*

**By Mark Zimmermann**

*Special to the Review*

When Pope Francis named Monsignor Mark Brennan, a priest of the Archdiocese of Washington, as a new auxiliary bishop for Baltimore, he chose a man who spent most of his life in parish ministry.

Bishop-designate Brennan, 69, has served since 2003 as the pastor of St. Martin of Tours Parish in Gaithersburg, a multilingual parish that is one of the largest in the Archdiocese of Washington.

Bishop-designate Brennan celebrated the 40th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood in 2016. Reflecting on his vocation during a December interview with the Catholic Standard, newspaper of the Archdiocese of Washington, he said he felt an “overwhelming sense of God’s faithfulness. ... The Lord is always there for me, giving me the help I need.”

The greatest challenge he faces as a parish priest, he said, “is just meeting the great variety of situations you encounter,” adding that the greatest joy comes in seeing God’s “grace work in the lives of people,” for example, when couples he counseled are working through the difficulties in their marriage, or when a young person is back on the right path, or when a man whose confession he heard tells him that he helped turn around the problems he was facing.

One afternoon a few days after he learned of his appointment as an auxiliary bishop but before it was formally announced, he was going to make Communion calls to about 10 people, who were from English, Spanish and French-speaking backgrounds.



*Bishop-designate Mark E. Brennan greets parishioners of St. Martin of Tours in Gaithersburg following a December Mass. (Kevin J. Parks/CR Staff)*

The 11 Masses each weekend at St. Martin of Tours Parish include five in English, five in Spanish for parishioners who come from many different Central and South American countries, and one in French for parishioners from West Africa. Most of St. Martin's 3,200 families are Hispanic.

"We call ourselves the Catholic Church. Catholic means universal. Well, in a parish like this, that's the reality each day," he said, noting that the catholicity there "is tangible. These are people we hope to be in heaven together (with). Let's get to know each other."

St. Martin's parish property, located right beside busy Frederick Avenue (Route 355) in Gaithersburg, northwest of Washington, D.C., includes a church and rectory, a parish school, a food pantry, and a soup kitchen in the church basement. Parishioners of different backgrounds pray and serve together, and at special times during the year, St. Martin's has multilingual Masses followed by receptions or picnics featuring food reflecting parishioners' different cultures.

The Boston native's family moved to the Washington area when he was 10, after his father who worked in the Naval Air Reserve Training Unit was transferred here. The Brennan family lived in Oxon Hill and attended Mass at St. Thomas More Parish in Washington. The future bishop graduated from St. Anthony's High School in Washington and earned a bachelor's degree in history from Brown University in Providence, R.I., before entering the seminary.

The future bishop was inspired by the dedicated example of his parish priests, remembering one very rainy Sunday morning when his Scout troop had camped out in southern Prince George's County, and a priest drove down to celebrate Mass under a tarp for the boys. "That impressed me," said the longtime parish priest who would come to know the importance of being there for his people.

After studying at Christ the King Seminary in Allegany, N.Y., and at the North American College in Rome, Father Mark Brennan was ordained as a priest of the Archdiocese of Washington in 1976.

A turning point in his priesthood came in 1985, when the priest who had served as a parochial vicar at Our Lady of Mercy Parish in Potomac and St. Pius X Parish in Bowie was asked by then-Archbishop James Hickey of Washington to learn Spanish. The future Cardinal Hickey had been his rector at the North American College and knew that the priest spoke Italian, which he had learned while visiting the Bambino Gesù children's hospital in Rome.

"We have a lot of immigrants from Central and South America, so I need priests to respond to them," Archbishop Hickey said, and Father Brennan and another Washington priest, Father Bill Ryan, were sent to the Dominican Republic, where they spent two months learning Spanish and five months doing parish work there.

The priests also took a pastoral training course in Colombia, and later spent a month

traveling through Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. That trip enabled him to see firsthand “places where some of the people (at his parish) come from. ... You also see the actual conditions people live in, what the church is doing. It was very helpful,” he said.

That training and those experiences opened up another world to him, Bishop-designate Brennan said.

When he returned to the Archdiocese of Washington, then-Father Brennan served as a parochial vicar at St. Bartholomew Parish, celebrating Masses and administering the sacraments there in English and in Spanish, setting a template for his future parish service as pastor of St. Thomas Apostle from 1998 until 2003 and then at St. Martin’s. He also served as the archdiocese’s director of priestly vocations from 1988 to 1998.

When he was earning his degree at Brown University, the future bishop studied the history of immigration in the United States, a history in which he has been immersed for the past three decades as a priest. For many of those immigrants then and now, the Catholic Church has been a big part of their lives, he said.

“The church - as it responded to immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th century - it has to respond again. This is what we have to do, as a church, as a people of God,” he said. “Immigrants are a wonderful insertion of energy, faith and customs in our American church.”

Speaking of the country’s recent immigrants from Latin America and other parts of the world, Bishop-designate Brennan said they bring vitality to parishes, with deep faith, a dedication to family life, and devotion to Christ and the Blessed Mother.

“These are good people who came here for the same reasons our ancestors came. They’re looking for a better life” for themselves and their families, he said.

In an earlier interview, Bishop-designate Brennan described St. Martin’s as “a true United Nations,” composed of descendants of previous waves of European immigrants, and also new immigrants from Latin America, Africa and Asia. “We’re all united in Christ,” he said.

*For more stories about Bishop-designate Parker and Bishop-designate Brennan, click [here](#).*