

Bishop Madden blesses altar at Sacred Heart of Jesus

When Bishop Denis J. Madden consecrated the white marble altar in the main church of Sacred Heart of Jesus July 21, the urban vicar became the second bishop to bless the ornate marble slab within the past 51 years.

The 5 p.m. ceremonial Mass at the Highlandtown church made Tony Mosetti – a 48-year-old postal worker from White Marsh and longtime parishioner of the parish – beam with pride as he watched the urban vicar rub the altar with holy oils and wave incense over the main church's centerpiece.

The marble altar was originally sanctified in honor of St. Gerard – a Redemptorist brother – in the lower church of the 134-year-old Baltimore parish on Sept. 29, 1956, by Bishop Jerome D. Sebastian.

During the 1950s the Catholic parish was enjoying large congregations that easily filled both the lower and upper churches, and its school had more than 1,200 students enrolled.

Like other city parishes, attendance began to falter in the 1960s when Baltimore experienced urban flight as residents traded their municipal dwellings for homes in the surrounding area.

About 10 years ago parish officials realized their 450-plus families could be accommodated in the upper church alone and decided to close the building's lower place of worship – leaving the handsome marble altar with it.

With the lower chapel converted into an education center, parish youths had an opportunity to see the dormant altar, but it wasn't being showcased the way many parishioners would have preferred, Mr. Mosetti said.

For some time church leaders of Sacred Heart of Jesus longed to replace the sturdy, wooden altar in the upper church with its counterpart in the lower chapel, mainly because its white marble décor better complemented the upstairs interior, said Father Gerard J. Szymkowiak, C.Ss.R., pastor.

"It's such a beautiful altar," Father Szymkowiak said. "Once it was finally moved upstairs (in June), everyone started to comment that it looked like it was specifically made for this space. It matches everything up there."

The wooden altar that had been in the upper church since the 1960s has been

moved to the parish sacristy until it finds a permanent home, he said. "Anyone who could use the altar is welcome to take it. It's a beautiful, sturdy altar. We just don't have a use for it now."

Though the marble altar was consecrated in 1956, it was rededicated because it had been taken apart and moved, Father Szymkowiak said.

Just before Bishop Madden blessed the altar, he presented William C. Turowski Sr., 60, of Highlandtown, with the Medal of Honor from the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

It was presented to Mr. Turowski - who received all of his sacraments in the church - for his lifetime of service to the parish, including fundraising and maintenance work that has saved Sacred Heart of Jesus thousands of dollars over the years, Bishop Madden said.

After the altar was adorned with cloth, flowers, a Bible, relics and eucharistic gifts, the urban vicar called on the 200-plus congregation to recognize the privilege of witnessing the blessing.

"It's just magnificent," Mr. Mosetti said after the ceremony. "It was a waste downstairs. It's just amazing. It's made a church that was already beautiful just glorious."