

Bishop Madden reflects on 40 years as a priest

When Bishop Denis J. Madden was ordained a priest in 1967, the April Fools Day date assured the anniversary of the event would be forever etched in his memory.

"It really is a memorable date," said the 67-year-old urban vicar of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, with his trademark jocular chuckle. "For better or worse, people have interpreted the significance of my ordination date for 40 years."

Bishop Madden was born in Carbondale, Pa., but grew up in the South Bronx and attended church at the nearby Benedictine parish of St. Anselm, where the seeds of cleric ambitions germinated.

Following his 1967 ordination at St. Mary's Abbey, Morristown, NJ, he served as a priest at the Benedictine Community of St. Paul's Abbey, a pastoral associate at St. Martin, Baltimore, in 1975 and a clinical psychologist the same year at the University of Maryland Hospital, a faculty member of the Tantur Eccumenical Institute, Jerusalem, in 1988, regional director for the Pontifical Mission for Palestine in 1994 and the associate secretary general for the Catholic Near East Welfare Association in New York in 1997.

In 2005 he was elevated to bishop and became the urban vicar of the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

"I guess the longer you are a priest, the more you realize this is your whole life," he said. "You are completely dedicated to it and supported by it."

When he first became a priest 40 years ago, more men were entering the vocation and it wasn't unusual for four or five priests to run a parish.

"Of course, now, with fewer priests, there is more involvement of the care of the Church with the deacons and laity," he said. "It has brought more collaboration between the clergy and laity and I see that as a positive thing for the parishes."

For young men contemplating a life in the priesthood, Bishop Madden suggests they consult their parish priests and pastors and to inquire with the office of vocations to find out all that is involved.

"It's an exciting time to be a priest in the Church," he said. "Now, with the shortage of priests, there is a more collaborative effort with deacons and laity. It's a much larger group you are working with and much more diverse."

Though the first blessing he performed moments after his ordination 40 years ago provided him with his first priestly feeling, Bishop Madden said the consciousness of his mission continues to grow to this day.

“As you administer the sacraments, assist people when they are dying, you become more and more aware of your priesthood and your role in the Church,” he said. “It grows continuously every day. It’s something that goes on throughout your whole life.”