

Bringing it all back home to Baltimore, Father Whitt still teaching

As staff canonist in the Metropolitan Tribunal of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Dominican Father Reginald Whitt untangles the twists and turns that bring men and women to the Catholic Center seeking the annulment of a marriage.

He had his own circuitous route to full communion with the Catholic Church.

Now in the fifth decade of his priesthood, Father Whitt finally has an assignment in his hometown. He was raised Baptist, in a blue-collar household where the passion for learning was palpable. That drive was honed as one of a handful of black students at what was then Loyola College.

“God put me in the hands of the Society of Jesus,” Father Whitt said, “so I could become a Catholic.”

He made that observation before heading to New Orleans, host city of the Joint Conference of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, the National Black Sisters’ Conference, the National Black Catholic Seminarians Association and the National Association of Black Deacons.

Father Whitt will be among 50 past and present leaders honored Aug. 1 as “exemplars.” Also among them is Father Donald Sterling, pastor of New All Saints in Liberty Heights, who that same day will offer a keynote address, titled “An Acknowledgement of Ongoing Ministry Challenges, Issues and Tensions.”

The Joint Conference comes 50 years after its beginnings, in 1968, when the United States was experiencing political and racial turmoil and Father Whitt was a brand-new Catholic.

While he studied at Yale Divinity School and earned advanced degrees from Duke Law School and The Catholic University of America, Father Whitt traces his love of

learning to his parents, Esley and Cora. His father may have been a steelworker at Sparrows Point, but, Father Whitt said, “We were a bookish family.”

A first cousin began dating a Catholic. “She dropped him,” Father Whit said, “and kept his religion. ... I was intrigued.” He “pulled down the encyclopedia and looked up Roman Catholic Church,” and read “about the authority to teach that Jesus gave the Apostles.”

He told his mother that he wanted to become a Catholic.

She told him to wait.

He was 12.

Father Whitt went from the Baltimore City College to Loyola College, on a state scholarship, in 1966. He entered the Catholic Church Aug. 27, 1967, just before the start of his sophomore year.

Working at the college library, re-shelving books – on religious orders – no less, he was “struck by this eerie, delightful and sickening feeling, that what I had done was the first step of a long journey rather than the final step of a journey into the church.”

Father Whitt’s reading led him to the Dominicans, and their charism for preaching. He has spent most of his ministry in academia, with stops as a lecturer in canon law at St. Augustine College of South Africa; associate professor at the Notre Dame Law School in South Bend, Ind.; and, for the previous 17 years, as a professor at the University of St. Thomas School of Law in Minneapolis.

He was “delighted” in May 2017, when he was assigned to the Baltimore Archdiocese, his hometown and that of the late **Cardinal Lawrence Shehan**, one of his “heroes.”

Father Whitt recalls a Baltimore “where the culture of Catholicism was thick around you.”

“We no longer have a critical mass of Catholics to support the various parishes,” he

said, “even though the need for Catholic services – evangelization, health care, social services, charity – the need for the work of the church in the city is greater than ever.

“The people who want everything that the Catholic Church has to offer don’t get it.”

The Tribunal, in many ways, fits in perfectly with the Dominican charism.

“This provides us,” he said of the Tribunal, “with the opportunity to help people come to a new appreciation of the vocation of marriage.

“It’s a healing ministry.”

Also see:

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