

Cardinal Baum: a new record-holder

Something quite remarkable happened recently: Cardinal William Wakefield Baum – emeritus Archbishop of Washington, emeritus Prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education, emeritus Major Penitentiary of the Catholic Church – passed the late Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore (who died March 24, 1921) to become the longest-serving American cardinal in history. It's an astonishing record that drew little public attention. Yet that's just the way Cardinal Baum, who exemplifies evangelical modesty and genuine Christian humility, would want it.

William Wakefield Baum was born Nov. 21, 1926, in Dallas, Texas, a biographical fact that has always struck me as more than a little ironic, given that there are few people on the planet less "Texas" and less "Big D" than this gentle scholar and pastor. Ordained a priest for the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Father Baum became an ecumenical pioneer, an advisor at Vatican II, and the first director of the U.S. bishops' committee on ecumenical affairs before being ordained bishop of Springfield-Cape Girardeau, Mo., on April 6, 1970.

Three years later, Bishop Baum was appointed Archbishop of Washington as successor to the legendary Cardinal Patrick O'Boyle (who was, *de facto* if not *de iure*, the first archbishop of the nation's capital). Created cardinal in the consistory of May 1976 and given the church of Santa Croce in Flaminia as his Roman parish (or "title"), Cardinal Baum participated in the two dramatic conclaves of 1978, the "year of three popes;" indeed, in the conclave of 2005, cardinal Baum, along with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, was the only cardinal-elect who had been in conclave before.

John Paul II appointed Cardinal Baum as Prefect of the Congregation of Catholic Education in March 1980, a post he held for 10 years until his appointment as head of the Apostolic Penitentiary – the man overseeing the church's penitential life or, as Cardinal Baum put it, the servant of "the Lord's mercy." He retired from that position after 11 years, thus preventing any further confusion in my office when I would send letters to the cardinal and some of my evangelical brethren would say, "I

didn't know they had a prison in the Vatican."

Cardinal Baum remained active on various curial congregations until his 80th birthday in 2006, and exercised a quiet, but often important, influence in the deliberations of the Congregation for Bishops, responsible for episcopal appointments in the developed world. Of the many Americans who worked in the Holy See over the past 20 years, he was held in a unique respect by his colleagues, including the locals: he spoke excellent Italian, he was not edgy, he was an old-school gentleman and he was deeply learned and manifestly holy. And so, despite never making it onto the media radar screen, he was a genuine "player" in Vatican affairs.

He was a gracious host in one of the Vatican's great apartments: just above St. Peter's square, looking straight at the basilica. The apartment was lined with bookcases, overflowing with volumes of history and biography as well as theology. He always remembered his time in Maryland with affection, and kept prints of the "Ark" and the "Dove," the two ships that brought Lord Baltimore's Catholic colonists to the new world in 1634, in his living room.

Like John Paul II, whom he revered, Cardinal Baum has borne great suffering with even greater patience and nobility. Macular degeneration has rendered the pleasure of reading difficult for this great reader; a variety of other ailments have left him in serious pain for months on end. Yet in the 23 years I've been privileged to know him and call him a friend, I've never heard a word of complaint from Cardinal Baum. Again like John Paul II, he's always much more interested in finding out how you and your family are doing than in cataloguing his own ailments and sufferings.

A deeply patriotic American, the cardinal was often saddened in recent years by the encroachments of the culture of death across the land. Yet he always urged others to continue the fight for the right things. His courage gave, and gives, us courage.

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