

Cardinal Keeler remembered: 'There goes a prince'

Describing Cardinal William H. Keeler as a "tornado" of nonstop work who considered it the "highest form of asceticism to never waste a moment," the cardinal's first priest-secretary in the Archdiocese of Baltimore said his boss also had a caring, pastoral side.

Delivering the homily for the cardinal's Solemn Vespers March 27 at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore, Father Michael White recalled that when the cardinal was elevated to the College of Cardinals in 1994, he took time out of a whirlwind schedule of activity in Rome to show concern for a member of the Swiss Guard whose mother had been ill.

The cardinal walked up to the guard and called him by name, Father White remembered in amazement, asking how the guard's mother was doing. When the cardinal found out the woman had died, he immediately pulled out his pocket calendar and scheduled a Mass for her on the spot, inviting the guard to attend.

As Cardinal Keeler walked away, Father White recalled, the shaken guard whispered to no one in particular: "There goes a prince."

Hundreds of mourners gathered in the basilica to pay their respects to that Prince of the Church during a liturgy marked by solemn chant and moments of laughter.

Mourners streamed past the cardinal's open casket before and after the liturgy as members of the Knights of Columbus and the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem stood at attention through the night.

Among the mourners who paused beside the cardinal's body were Little Sisters of the Poor who had cared for him at St. Martin's Home for the Aged as the cardinal's health declined over the last several years. Others included St. Teresa of Kolkata's Missionaries of Charity, whom the cardinal had brought to Baltimore to care for dying AIDS patients at the Gift of Hope near St. Wenceslaus in East Baltimore.

One man traced the sign of the cross on the cardinal's forehead and lovingly touched the cardinal's chin. Another woman gently kissed the cardinal's forehead. Others bowed or made the sign of the cross as they stood before the 14th archbishop of Baltimore who died March 23.

In his homily, Father White recounted how the cardinal was running late on Father White's first day as the cardinal's priest-secretary. Father White came upon a yellow light as he drove the cardinal and a high-ranking Vatican official to Washington, D.C., for an event hosted by Washington Cardinal James Hickey in honor of the Patriarch of Constantinople and a delegation of Greek bishops.

"The cardinal, who was multitasking," Father White recalled, "lifted his head and shot me a look. I came to call it 'The Look:' a steel-gray squint I came to know well and experience often. It could communicate a range of reactions from 'this is totally unacceptable' to 'you're fired.'"

The cardinal asked Father White to keep going.

Before long, a police officer pulled them over, Father White said, leading the Vatican official to believe they were getting a police escort. Upon seeing who was in the car, the police officer let them go with a request only to slow down - a request that was promptly ignored by the cardinal. After that car ride, Father White said, and even more adventures once the group made it to Washington, the young priest-secretary knew he was "in over his head."

Extolling Cardinal Keeler for having a "genius" for collaboration and "an instinctive eye for the big picture and long-term goals," Father White said the cardinal was the ultimate "bishop's bishop."

Father White, pastor of Church of the Nativity in Timonium, recalled how the cardinal, despite declining health, made a trip to Rome in 2011 for the beatification of St. John Paul II. Among many "lasts," it would be the cardinal's last trip to Rome, the last time he preached, the last time he offered a public Mass and his last trip anywhere.

On the day they departed Rome, Cardinal Keeler and Father White were driven to the top of a hill in Rome that offered a beautiful vista of the Eternal City. The

cardinal was immersed in paperwork, yet, at Father White's prodding, finally looked up to see the view. The cardinal sighed deeply, Father White said, and a single tear flowed down his cheek. The only other time Father White saw the cardinal shed a tear was when his mother died.

"Rome was like a mother to him," Father White said, "and he was her son."

At the conclusion of the vespers service, Archbishop William E. Lori said the Archdiocese of Baltimore was blessed to have the cardinal as its spiritual shepherd. He thanked members of the cardinal's family for "sharing the cardinal with us for these many years."

"From your family has sprung a wise and loving shepherd, a good friend and a great leader," the archbishop said. "So, indeed, may you be consoled as we lovingly return the great Cardinal Keeler to his Creator and to his Redeemer."

The archbishop drew applause for the Little Sisters of the Poor and Father William Foley, director of pastoral care for retired priests, who cared for the cardinal in his later years. Father White also reprised his role as the cardinal's priest-secretary in Cardinal Keeler's latter years.

"Going to heaven with the Little Sisters at your death bed," the archbishop said, "(is) sort of a first-class ticket."

Moments before paying her respects to the cardinal, Charlotte O'Conor told the Catholic Review that her cousin was a "wonderful human being" who always made time for his family.

"He married us," said O'Conor, who was accompanied by her husband, Philip. "He's just been so generous with his time to help our family and be there for the kids and communion and confirmations. He never forgot us. He always had our backs."

O'Conor added that Cardinal Keeler had a personality that was "very welcoming."

"He was very humble and he was very firm at the same time," she said, "and I think that combination is really unusual."

Gwendolyn Somerville, a resident of Catholic Charities' Basilica Place apartment building for senior citizens in Baltimore, said she got to know the cardinal by attending morning Mass at the basilica.

"I liked what he stood for," she said. "He was for the people. He was a people person."

Among those attending the vigil were Cardinal Edwin F. O'Brien, who traveled from Moscow to Rome to Baltimore to be present for the liturgy. Bishop Denis J. Madden, Bishop Adam Parker and Bishop Mark Brennan were also present. The Mount St. Mary's Seminary Vespers Schola under the direction of Julie Parker led the congregation in chant.

Visit the Archdiocese of Baltimore's tribute page to Cardinal Keeler here.