

Cardinal Stafford: God never disappoints

By Catholic Review Staff

ROME - The work of Catholic Charities in Baltimore and the visible ministry of an unknown, unnamed Bon Secours nun, along with the influence of his parents and grandparents, inspired and inflamed the imagination of Cardinal J. Francis Stafford as a young man in his perception of Baltimore City and have taken him around the world on a long life of ministry.

Head of a Vatican department since 1996, Cardinal Stafford has been joined in Rome by Cardinal Edwin F. O'Brien, archbishop emeritus of Baltimore, so that there are now two members of the College of Cardinals with links to Baltimore in the Eternal City.

As Cardinal O'Brien took up his post full time as grand master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem, he follows the footsteps of Cardinal Stafford, a Baltimore native who served as auxiliary bishop of Baltimore; bishop of Memphis, Tenn.; and archbishop of Denver before being named as head of the Pontifical Council for the Laity at the Vatican and eventually Major Penitentiary of the Apostolic Penitentiary in Rome.

Cardinal Stafford was in attendance at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Homeland for the May 16 installation of Archbishop William E. Lori.

Now retired and nearing the age of 80, at which he will no longer be able to vote in a conclave for a new pope, Cardinal Stafford has seen much in his years of service to the church. Now living in an apartment in Rome, near the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere, the cardinal has spent time with popes and young people, with lay people and bishops from around the world.

WORLD YOUTH DAY PIONEER

As archbishop of Denver, Cardinal Stafford hosted Pope John Paul II for World Youth

Day in 1993. He recalled that a huge thunderstorm drenched the crowd waiting for the pope's arrival. Just as he arrived, the sun came out and a rainbow appeared, which the youths pointed out to the pope, as if to say, "Look, Holy Father, look what you brought us," the cardinal recalled in a relaxed interview in his apartment early in 2012.

"It was hope that John Paul brought us and that they brought to him and to all the bishops and the rainbow was of course that biblical sign of hope," Cardinal Stafford said.

He recalled that one of the pilots of one of the presidential helicopters that had shuttled the pope around the events in Denver asked to speak with him before the pilot left at the end of the visit. The pilot related to the archbishop that he had flown a number of military missions in Vietnam, especially in areas of conflict, so he knew what it was like to be bouncing around, evading enemy fire. He said that on his arrival to Mile-High Stadium with Pope John Paul, when the crowd realized his helicopter contained the pope since he had not been on the first few to arrive, "This immense series of cheers went up and shook the helicopter, and he said he had never experienced that before."

The pope's visit "brought about a revolution in the way bishops communicated with youths and young people wanted to communicate with them in ways they didn't want to before," Cardinal Stafford said.

Among the other great joys of his ministry he counts the pastoral visits to parishes he made as auxiliary bishop in Baltimore.

"I met magnificent people, especially among the elderly and magnificent dedication among priests and religious women and laity. And the vision of the city was a mission of proclaiming the mystery of Christ as the Catholic Church understood that to people who were impoverished in body and spirit."

He mentioned the great resources the church has - such as schools, parishes and Catholic Charities - but above all a vision of the city.

"There were men and women of immense vision of the potential of the church in the

city, and that was a joy in Baltimore,” he said.

The future cardinal graduated from what was then Loyola High School in 1950, then studied at what was then Loyola College in Baltimore, and at St. Mary’s Seminary and University, Baltimore, as well as The Catholic University of America. He was ordained to the priesthood in Rome Dec. 15, 1957, before serving a variety of ministries in the archdiocese: as associate pastor at Immaculate Heart of Mary, Baynesville, and St. Ann, Baltimore; chaplain to Villa Maria, Baltimore, and confessor for the Carmelite nuns in Dulaney Valley. He lived in residence at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and at St. Vincent de Paul Parish, and was administrator of Sts. Philip and James Parish, Charles Village.

The cardinal, who served at Catholic Charities of Baltimore from 1965 to 1976, was pleased to hear that Our Daily Bread has still not missed a day of serving meals.

UNIVERSAL CHURCH

Cardinal Stafford was named a monsignor (chaplain of His Holiness) in 1969, appointed auxiliary bishop of Baltimore Jan. 19, 1976, and was ordained to the episcopate Feb. 29 of that year in the cathedral by Archbishop William D. Borders.

He was named bishop of Memphis, Tenn., Nov. 17, 1982, and took possession of the diocese early in 1983.

In talking about what it was like to be asked to leave Maryland for ministry elsewhere, Cardinal Stafford admitted with a smile that before his appointment as bishop of Memphis, “I didn’t think there was anything on the other side of the Alleghenies.” The dogwoods and the azaleas are different from the flora in Maryland, but the people are different, too. The church in Maryland was formed in the Colonial experience; the church west of the Allegheny Mountains was “the post-Revolutionary experience of the opening of the West,” he said. “So, it’s a different world.”

“Memphis is a very Christian culture, much more so than Denver,” he noted. “You scrape Catholic skin (in Memphis) and you find a Southern Baptist. There’s no place

in Baltimore or Denver where you would go to a gas station and see 'John 3:16.' "

In Denver he had experience of another culture, the huge influx of Hispanics, not only second- and third-generation Hispanics, but tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands, coming directly from Mexico.

"They brought an immense richness, they brought the Catholic imagination, sacramental imagination ... and they brought a popular Catholic culture that had their teenage Catholic daughters coming out in a spiritual way," he said of the quinceañera ceremony for 15-year-old girls.

As president of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, Cardinal Stafford had additional experiences with young people from around the world, as his council was responsible for World Youth Days.

He said that it is harder these days to inspire vocations to the priesthood and religious life because young people don't see as many role models as before. Recalling a Bon Secours nun he had witnessed every day on the #15 streetcar when he was a young commuter/student at Loyola High, he asked, "Do we get on streetcars and see nuns? Do we see the respect (for religious vocations) when we ride public transportation?"

He added that the breakdown of the family has had an effect, too.

"I think the crisis in marriage, in the vocation of marriage, makes it very difficult to see the mystery of Christ ... as spouse of the church," he said.

Though he never expected to be a cardinal when he was studying for the priesthood at St. Mary's Seminary and University, looking back on all the phases of his ministry and all the moves and changes he has been asked to accept over the years, he admits it has been a fascinating life, "and it continues to be," he said. "God never disappoints us - never, never, never."

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