

Catholic Review Column: Giving Thanks for Cardinal Keeler

Next week we celebrate Thanksgiving Day. As we typically do this time of year, we reflect on the many things for which we have to be thankful, and offer our gratitude to God for these and so many other blessings.

This year, however, is a special Thanksgiving, for it marks the 20th anniversary of the elevation to the College of Cardinals of Cardinal William H. Keeler, 14th Archbishop of Baltimore. So, I am proud to devote this year's Thanksgiving column to my beloved predecessor and offer thanks for his many gifts on behalf of the church.

Cardinal Keeler is still very much a beloved figure. Just about everywhere I go people ask me about him. In fact, many, many bishops stopped to ask me about the cardinal during last week's meeting of the nation's bishops here in Baltimore. And whenever I visit a parish or a hospital or when I meet a civic or faith leader from another church, or even go to a restaurant or museum, I am very often asked, "How is our dear friend, Cardinal Keeler?"

Such evident and lasting affection and respect is a true measure of the cardinal's extraordinary gifts, personal warmth and endless ability. The cardinal served at the helm of the nation's first Catholic diocese for 18 years. During those nearly two decades, he not only elevated the profile of the archdiocese through his extraordinary leadership at the national and international levels, but touched the lives of countless people along the way through the visionary programs and initiatives he began.

Whether leading efforts to expand Catholic Charities, creating scholarships for inner-city youths, or combatting pornography, abortion and the death penalty, Cardinal Keeler was a champion for the dignity of all human life.

He was also a passionate and respected leader in the area of ecumenical and interfaith relations. The cardinal served as chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee

on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and is widely considered one of the world's foremost experts on Catholic-Jewish relations. To this day, the cardinal is a beloved figure in Jewish, Muslim and Protestant communities here in Baltimore. I am most thankful for his example and for the wonderful relationship we enjoy with our brothers and sisters of other faiths, thanks to the foundation of cooperation and understanding that he laid.

He also has a great affection and appreciation for this archdiocese. Anyone who has ever spoken to the cardinal for any length of time might think he's a lifelong Baltimorean, instead of an adopted son. He is especially proud of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the first Catholic cathedral constructed after the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. It is viewed by many as the "mother church" of American Catholicism, and is an architectural gem in its own right.

Cardinal Keeler's appointment as Archbishop of Baltimore came as the basilica began to show its age (the cornerstone was laid in 1806) and the effects of years of deferred maintenance. Armed with the gifts of vision, leadership and determination, the cardinal led the campaign to restore the basilica - a historic landmark and national shrine - preserving it for future generations of Catholics and people of all faiths. I, as well as current and future generations of Catholics, owe a great deal of gratitude to the cardinal for preserving this most historic house of worship and monument to religious freedom.

Of course, these are just a few highlights from the cardinal's extraordinary life and ministry. A single column can't possibly describe the true reach of the cardinal's impact on our local church, our community and the countless people whose lives were bettered because of him.

On this Thanksgiving, I give thanks to my 15 predecessors who led this archdiocese, and offer a special prayer of thanksgiving to the 14th Archbishop of Baltimore for his extraordinary example, personal grace and visionary leadership.