

Father Barr sees bright future at Immaculate Conception

For Immaculate Conception in Towson, the Oct. 2 installation of Father Joseph F. Barr by Auxiliary Bishop Denis J. Madden signals that the 3,200-family parish is turning a corner.

Parishioners endured a painful 2009. Then-pastor Monsignor F. Dennis Tinder announced the closing of the parish-run Towson Catholic High School in July of that year because of financial issues. In November, the pastor announced he was retiring Dec. 1 due to medical problems. He died three days after his retirement, as it was discovered he was suffering from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

Father Barr appears to be the right leader at the right time.

"They were suffering," said Father Barr, 58, of parishioners. "I recognized the pain and the loss, but said, 'Let's go forward.'"

It's a homecoming, as he served as an associate pastor of Immaculate Conception from 1982 to 1988. Some parishioners still show him photos from those days.

Father Barr began his new appointment in July and believes his oath of fidelity to the bishop shows a commitment through good and bad times.

"To see that solidarity between a pastor and a bishop and to understand that a pastor's authority flows from his bishop is big," Father Barr said.

Father Barr previously served 15 years as pastor of Holy Family in Davidsonville, a parish he deeply loves. He also had been president of the board of pastors for School of the Incarnation in Gambrills. Holy Family recently completed a 29,000-square foot parish hall filled with classrooms, a nursery and a library. Immaculate Conception has a thriving elementary school.

Father Barr wants the priests of the parish to familiarize themselves with all parish

ministries and become partners in those endeavors. Another challenge is to re-strengthen relationships with the medical and nursing facilities, of which there are at least 17, near the parish. Priests will be a visible presence for those separated from the church due to illness and age.

Third, he is part of a group of Catholic pastors along the York Road corridor that is gathering frequently to discuss common concerns and plans. Fourth, he wants to re-establish parish relationships with the Towson Area Ministries Association.

He hopes to develop a long-term master plan to address ministries and facilities, including the future of the Towson Catholic building.

New Asian, African and European families have joined long-standing parishioners thanks to medical, education and information technology jobs. Father Barr has been attending parties thrown by parishioners for new families.

“There’s a great diversity to this parish,” he said. “People shop for a parish. For some, they tell me they’re attracted to the liturgy and the reverence at Mass. It’s more traditional liturgy here. For others, it’s the natural beauty of the church”

Father Barr said he has a love of ministry to share with parishioners.

“I’m so thrilled to be able to bounce from being with elementary school kids to hospice care, to nursing homes and senior citizens to youth groups,” Father Barr said. “That’s what makes me thrive.”