

Father Lavin left mark in Annapolis

As a Redemptorist, Father John Lavin, C.Ss.R., accepted a vocation that includes “extraordinary preaching.”

Though that might sound like a command for amazing eloquence, St. Alphonsus charged his order with the mission of bringing the Good News to the poor and marginalized.

Father Lavin, a native Bostonian who has been at St. Mary’s in Annapolis for the last nine years, has followed St. Alphonsus’ call during his more than 40 years in the priesthood by ministering to Hispanic populations in Maryland and across the country.

And now, the former pastor in Baltimore has been called home ... to Boston, that is.

At the end of July, Father Lavin will leave Annapolis for the Basilica of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, which was founded by the Redemptorists as the “Mission Church,” the institution that gave the name to Boston’s Mission Hill neighborhood. He will once again minister to the Hispanic community. At age 67, Father Lavin says the move to Boston may signal “a slowdown, but not anything near a retirement.”

“It’s like going home, but I love Annapolis,” he said. “It would be hard not to love Annapolis. It’s such a great little big town.”

The lifelong Red Sox fan does count Mission Hill’s proximity to Fenway Park (walking distance) as a small consolation to leaving Maryland after 16 years.

He arrived here in 1992, becoming the pastor of St. Michael during a transitional period for the parish in east Baltimore’s Butchers Hill neighborhood.

The church had been without a pastor for five years when he arrived. Changing demographics in the neighborhood had brought an influx of Latinos to the area, yet no one was ministering to them on a full-time basis.

Under Father Lavin, St. Michael's became a center for Hispanic ministry, and in 1995 it joined with a neighboring parish to become the Catholic Community of St. Michael/St. Patrick, Fells Point.

He credits the smooth transition to a band of dedicated parishioners and an appreciation of the "universal language of music."

In 1999, the Irish-American known as "Padre Juan" moved to St. Mary's in Annapolis to be a missionary to Hispanic immigrants. One aspect of his ministry has been to call for political change in immigration policies.

"One of my biggest concerns," he said, "is that Congress comes up with a new and more just immigration bill."

The son of a Spanish teacher in the Boston Public School System, Father Lavin sees his calling as more than only serving the Hispanic community.

At St. Mary's, he was on the Respect Life committee. He also helps couples heal troubled marriages through Retrouvaille, and enjoys working with English- and Spanish-speaking small Christian communities.

All of this is part of his vocation to preach the Gospel. Father Lavin said, "You might say St. Mary's is a well-off parish. But there are always people suffering in so many ways. The bottom line is people are human, whether they are well-off or poor."

He has spent most of his career working with Latino communities in the U.S. Father Lavin has even written a book, "Noticing Lazarus at Our Door," to draw attention to

the historical, economic, cultural and religious experiences of Latinos.

In 1967, shortly after his ordination, he went to Puerto Rico, where he spent most of the next eight years in ministry. In 1975, it was back to Boston and his first stint in Mission Hill, where he served the Hispanic community until 1981, when he became pastor of a parish in New York's Spanish Harlem for six years.

Just before moving to Baltimore, Father Lavin spent five years traveling to Hispanic communities across the United States for three weeks at a time. Many of these communities had no regular Spanish-speaking minister, but his job was to help lay the foundations for an expanded Hispanic ministry.

For four decades - whether in the role of pastor, itinerant preacher or parish priest - Father Lavin has brought the Gospel to America's burgeoning Latino population one community at a time. And that, in a word, is extraordinary.