

# Forrest Gump of Catholicism began humbly in Baltimore



*Archbishop Philip M. Hannan as a seminarian at St. Charles College in Catonsville.  
(CR/File)*

A friend once referred to the late New Orleans [Archbishop Philip M. Hannan](#) as the “Forrest Gump of Catholicism.”

Just like the Tom Hanks’ character, Archbishop Hannan always seemed to be at the right place at the right time - making history as much as witnessing it.

Just consider some of the roles the native Washingtonian so ably filled in his 98 years: paratroop chaplain during the Second World War, Catholic newspaper editor, counselor to President John F. Kennedy, Civil Rights and pro-life advocate, attendee of all four sessions of the Second Vatican Council, shepherd to the New Orleans archdiocese and broadcast journalist.

A day before one of the American Church’s greatest figures is laid to rest, it’s good to recall that Archbishop Hannan’s spectacular priesthood began humbly in Baltimore.

Before receiving a master’s degree from The Catholic University of America and studying in Rome for four years, the young Phil Hannan was a student at St. Charles College in Catonsville, a minor seminary for boys considering a call to the religious life.

After his Dec. 8, 1939 ordination in Rome, Archbishop Hannan's first assignment was as assistant pastor of St. Thomas Aquinas in the Hampden neighborhood of Baltimore.

In his 2010 memoir, "[The Archbishop Wore Combat Boots](#)," Archbishop Hannan recalled that although he had been the recipient of a "brilliant academic preparation" for the priesthood, he knew little of the practical "soul-to-soul work of helping other human beings walk in the grace of God."

Baltimore gave him that experience.

One of Archbishop Hannan's primary duties as assistant pastor was to help take the census and contact parish couples who were married outside the church. In the 1940s, of St. Thomas's 400 registered families, about a fourth were not in a valid marriage.

One day, Archbishop Hannan recalled in his memoir, a "tall, strongly built" Appalachian man with a "surfeit of missing teeth" knocked on the rectory door. He wanted then-Father Hannan to convince his wife to return to him. The priest visited the woman's address the next morning, receiving a curt greeting from a woman who said she didn't know where her mother was.


Archbishop Hannan recalled that he told the woman that her father wanted her mother to return home, adding that he would guarantee that the man would neither bite nor harm her. Another woman suddenly appeared at the head of the stairs, Archbishop Hannan recalled, and asked how Father Hannan could make such a guarantee.

"Because he has lost his teeth," Father Hannan replied.

Humor won the day and the woman returned to her husband.

“A priest’s most important task is to know the spiritual needs of his parishioners,” Archbishop Hannan wrote in his memoir, “which requires getting out among them. You learn how to be a priest by doing the work of one – most importantly, listening.”

Census-taking ended up being “just the spiritual-engagement short course needed by this rookie,” he said.

While at St. Thomas, Father Hannan’s greatest achievement was launching a pioneering youth ministry. He spearheaded the renovation of an old school building to host dances and other events for area parishes. 

The future archbishop organized an inter-parish moonlight cruise for young people, using his own money as a down payment on the boat. The event was the first of many activities of what would become the Council of Catholic Social Clubs, later to be renamed the Catholic Youth Organization. Father Hannan headed the group until he entered the armed services in 1942.

In a 1992 interview with The Catholic Review a few days before the archdiocese celebrated the 50th anniversary of Archbishop Hannan’s historic youth cruise, the archbishop said young people were a priority because he knew they needed a place to gather and grow into responsible, faith-filled adults. He recalled that one of his techniques for attracting crowds was picking the “prettiest girls” to be members of the welcoming committee.

“That way,” he said, “we didn’t have to worry about boys coming. It’s a law of nature.”

Archbishop Hannan said the dances were opportunities for catechesis. He would field questions from young people regarding the doctrines of the church, he said. Archbishop Hannan told The Catholic Review that combining catechesis with attractive activities is the formula for a successful youth group.

“Young people have greater needs today and face bigger challenges because of things like premarital sex and drug use,” he said in the 1992 interview. “There is an even greater need today for outreach to young people. Priests also have to be active in meeting with young people.”

From Baltimore to the world, Archbishop Hannan was a man of great wisdom and vision. Our church has been greatly blessed by his life.