

‘He deserves everything,’ say friends, parishioners and clergy of Bishop Rozanski

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It’s a story Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski loves to repeat, one that illustrates his self-deprecating sense of humor.

It was May 2000, and he was at St. John the Evangelist in Severna Park for the funeral Mass for its long-time pastor, Monsignor Edward F. Staub. The parish was undergoing substantial renovations, and plywood was the only thing separating dress shoes from mud as the faithful made their way into the liturgy.

“I pity the sucker who has to come here,” a fellow priest whispered to then-Father Rozanski.

Bishop Rozanski, of course, became the next pastor of St. John the Evangelist, where he left an impression longer than the four years he spent in Severna Park.

“He came into what could have been a difficult transition, and did a phenomenal job,” said Father James Proffitt, the current pastor of St. John the Evangelist. “He was here less than four years, but long enough for the people to love him.”

Father Proffitt recounted that 2000 anecdote June 19, after Pope Francis appointed Bishop Rozanski the next bishop of the Diocese of Springfield, Mass.

As an auxiliary bishop in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Bishop Rozanski used his sense of humor not just to poke fun at himself, but to reassure priests and parishes through challenging situations.

“He teaches you to laugh,” said Father Proffitt, when asked what Bishop Rozanski taught him. “Any conversation we have on the phone, you could accomplish the business aspect in half the time, if not for the laughter.”

“If there is a situation people are dealing with, he’ll interject humor in an appropriate way. He’ll let people know, ‘Things are not as bad as you think.’ That’s one of the reasons why he’s popular among priests.

Father Proffitt added that Bishop Rozanski is a “very good listener.”

“He has a pastor’s heart,” Father Proffitt said. “One of the things that makes him effective as a bishop is that he was a pastor.”

Sister of St. Joseph Joan Blair continues to experience that touch, even though Bishop Rozanski left St. Mary, Star of the Sea in Baltimore in January 2000. The way she describes him, the people of Springfield are getting a magnetic prelate.

"He's very approachable and easy to talk to, very down to earth," said Sister Joan, a St. Agnes Hospital nurse who resides in the convent at St. Mary, Star of the Sea. "I got to know him very well, and he has remained a friend. ... He's always had time for people. Because he was so personable, he drew people to himself."

Recently hospitalized herself, Sister Joan was lifted by a note from Bishop Rozanski.

"That's the kind of person he is," Sister Joan said.

Bishop Rozanski celebrated Christmas and Easter liturgies at a women's prison in Jessup, and his ability to relate with people from all walks should hold him in good stead in Massachusetts.

Meghan Young was a young reporter for the Catholic Review from 2006 to 2007, when her beats included Bishop Rozanski.

"He made my life as a reporter so much easier," she said. "You could always count on him for a really great quote."

The two continue to exchange Christmas cards, and Bishop Rozanski was the celebrant in June 2010, when Young, a graduate of what is now Notre Dame of Maryland University in Baltimore, married Patrick Young Jr. in its Marikel Chapel.

Sharon Biggs is a parishioner of St. Stephen, Bradshaw, but 30 years ago her family worshipped at St. Michael the Archangel, Overlea, Bishop Rozanski's first assignment as a priest.

"I was on the school board, and the students loved Father Mitch," said Biggs, who reiterated a common sentiment. "We're very sorry to lose him, but he deserves everything that is happening to him."

Retired Bishop William C. Newman was a Baltimore auxiliary in 1984, when Bishop Rozanski was ordained a priest.

"It's been a real pleasure to see him grow and mature, as a priest, pastor and now bishop," Bishop Newman said. "We all recognize that he has that wonderful blend of the pastoral approach and the administrative talent. He loves people, and loves being able to do what he can for them."

Like Bishop Newman, Bishop Rozanski was born and raised in Baltimore.

"He grew up in this archdiocese, he went to school here, he was educated here, he was very much a son of this local church," said Bishop Denis J. Madden, Baltimore's other auxiliary. "I think that always came through. I found that to be of immense help to me."

He noted Bishop Rozanski's role in the coming together of five Western Maryland parishes to form Our Lady of the Mountains Parish in Cumberland, saying, "In a lot of ways he presented us with a model when we do these restructurings."

Bishop Madden also praised Bishop Rozanski's work in Hispanic ministry, echoed by Mary Ellen Russell, executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference.

"Bishop Rozanski is a passionate and caring advocate for the immigrant community," Russell said, "and an enthusiastic supporter of helping young immigrant children realize a hopeful future through passing the DREAM Act."

Given Bishop Rozanski's relative youth and accomplishments, an appointment at the head of another diocese had been rumored for several years.

"It was a matter of time that he would be given a diocese," Bishop Madden said. "It wasn't a complete surprise."

Acknowledging that "it's a great loss to all of us here in Baltimore," Bishop Madden will be there when his "dear friend" is installed in Springfield.

"It's bittersweet," Bishop Madden said. "You can't be more happy for him or the people there."

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