

In his own words: A conversation with Bishop Denis J. Madden

Bishop Denis J. Madden, auxiliary bishop emeritus of Baltimore, celebrates the 50th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood April 1. In anticipation of that milestone, the Catholic Review sat down with him for three extensive interviews.

His responses have been edited for clarity.

As you were growing up in the Bronx, your father brought guests home for dinner. How did that influence you?

He worked on the railroad. He was a brakeman. The people he would bring home would be sleeping under railroad bridges at night, so basically they used to call them hobos. He would bring them home – usually just one, sometimes two – for a hot meal, and oftentimes to shower, or bathe.

The thing about it was as a kid and a teenager, it was the last thing you wanted, especially if your friends were there.

Sometimes, my friends would say, “Your father is not going to bring someone home tonight is he?”

And I would say, “I hope not.”

He was not much of a preacher man. He was not a religious man, but he had that quality about him of caring for people. His actions spoke louder than any words.

I remember one time I had cleverly thought that if we made sandwiches or something, he could bring down sandwiches and be helping even more than one person.

That was one of the only times he said something: “Everyone deserves a hot meal.”

Describe your early exposures to the Catholic faith - you joined the Benedictines, with no thoughts of ever become a bishop.

Our priests in the parish were Benedictines, and I was heavily influenced by them.

At that time there were at least five priests in the parish. They were all very different in many ways from each other, and yet they lived together and worked together for the welfare of the parish.

That was one of the things that attracted me to the Benedictines and to this communal life, was just to see the way they interacted.

Father Stephen was the one with all the youth groups. He was very active with sports and games.

Father Ralph was the one who trained all the altar boys.

Father Damien was our pastor; he was just a loving pastor.

We had nuns in school. There were 55 kids in one classroom, and the nuns would teach all day. They were Dominican sisters, and God help them.

I mean, they had to put up with these urchins from the Bronx all day long. Sometimes, we thought they were being overly harsh to us and we'd run to our pastor, Father Damien.

We would say, "Those nuns hate us."

He would say, "No they don't hate you; they love you. They love you and they want to help you learn; that's what they want."

It was a wonderful, wonderful area.

Describe how you were singled out after your ordination as a Benedictine priest to become a counselor to seminarians at St. Paul's Abbey in Newton, N.J., where you had attended minor seminary.

It was my hope that after ordination, I would go to the missions, because we were missionary Benedictines.

But the abbot said he wanted me to be trained as a counselor for the seminarians, so I was sent actually to Columbia University in New York.

I had taken some psychology courses in college, but I had no real background, not enough to get into a graduate school, but I got in. I think it was because of the craziness – it was because of the grace of God, but it was the craziness of the situation.

I had a good academic record, and when I went to Columbia for the interview, they told me they thought I would be an attractive student, so I should take some makeup courses, then apply.

I said, “No, you don’t understand.”

This was in, like, February and they had already made their decisions for the year, and I said, “No, you don’t understand. You see, my abbot wants me to come in September.”

They said, “Yeah, we heard that argument.”

I said, “Yeah, he won’t accept that, so when I go back, I’ll have to tell him I couldn’t come.”

The guy that was interviewing me, he came in. Another professor came in. Finally, three of them were talking to me. They were talking for a long time. They went out and came back in.

They said, “OK, you can come in September, but you’ll have to really ... We suggest that you study from now until September to get ready, because you’re going to be with a highly competitive group of classmates.”

So I went, and I did have to study a lot to try to get anywhere near my classmates, but it was a good time.

It was a very rigorous program – two years. You had to do a six-month externship and you had to write a master’s thesis.

I thought it was more than enough to be a counselor in a seminary.

But then I was asked to go to the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Ind., to get a Ph.D., and I thought, "You know, I don't think I need that for what I'm going to do."

It was those days when you were told what to do, and you weren't really asked for your advice on different things.

And it was wonderful. I loved Notre Dame, and that's how I got my degree out there.

As a psychologist, can you describe the interplay between your faith and your scientific understanding? Where does psychology end and spirituality take over or vice versa?

One of the things in psychology is you learn a lot about the human condition, the human mind, the strengths and weaknesses of character.

I think that psychology, in many ways, opens you up. You can see it not as something that has all the answers but as a way of learning more -you learn more about yourself, you learn more about society.

Your faith is something that really then gives meaning to everything.

I was the co-director of what was called the clinical research program for violent behavior (at the University of Maryland School of Medicine). Around town it was called the "violence clinic." Practically 99 percent of our patients were there on orders of the court. They either came to the clinic or they went to jail, and we saw a lot of people in jail.

We saw a lot of people out at Clifton T. Perkins Hospital Center, where people would go when they're found not guilty by reason of insanity or found not competent to stand trial.

There is something within each individual - there is a certain goodness there that you can appeal to. One of my mentors has always said that.

He said, "That's what we make our appeal to - that goodness."

Now, that doesn't mean that particular person at that particular time doesn't need to

be behind bars, because they're still dangerous either to themselves or someone else.

But there's still something inside there.

I always feel that religion or faith gives the meaning to all those things. It's more than just a psychological dictum or something like that. Christ was dealing with prostitutes and tax collectors and sinners and things like that, but he saw them as people who could receive his message, so there had to be something there. So for me it really fits very well together.

When psychology tries to have everything encapsulated and supply all the answers, it loses its real purpose.

One of our most dangerous situations was when we had either psychologists or social workers who were really acting under the premise of "you just have to be kind" or just wanting to hold the person's hand or something like that. Those were the people who, more often than not, would be assaulted.

There are folks you can love, but it's a tough love - that would be one way of saying it. People who have trouble with violence are very streetwise. They know when you really don't know what you're talking about or they're getting one over on you. Psychology helps you deal with those things. It teaches you how to assess those situations, to do a mental status exam, take a good history and learn from the history of the individual.

You are known for your approachability and kindness, and yet you know quite a bit about violence, even co-authoring a 1976 book titled "Rage, Hate, Assault and Other Forms of Violence." Where did that interest come from?

(Laughs) That title was from my co-author, Dr. John Lyon.

My interest in violence came from my interest in the peace movement.

The one turning point was when I was a student at Columbia. There was a big march down Fifth Avenue to end the war in Vietnam.

I was there with my classmates. There were all these signs, "Make love, not war," "Peace" and the peace symbol – you know, all the stuff you see.

The police had cordoned off Fifth Avenue so that one lane was left open for cars, and the rest of the avenue was left for the marchers.

A New York taxi driver rolled down his window, and he let loose with ... what he thought of the marchers and their parents.

Their parents?

Yeah, you know, "Your mother, da da da da da..."

Terrible, terrible things.

And so, with that, some of the marchers and some of my classmates ran over and pulled the guy out of the cab, and began to beat him.

I tried to pull these guys off of him.

I said, "This is crazy, this is crazy,"

There were all these signs in the air, you know, "Make love, not war," and they've got this guy on the ground and they're hitting him.

And now I'm getting smacked around by the crowds there – people didn't know me.

I just pulled my way out then walked all the way back up from – I don't know where it was – maybe down around the 40s or something. I walked all the way back to 220th Street where Columbia was.

And I thought to myself, "This is crazy."

I loved these people; they were my classmates, I thought, "How could these people do that?"

So I started reading a lot, about peace and about anger, about what makes people angry, and about people who commit violent crimes.

And then when it came time for me to do an interview for an internship – to get your Ph.D. you have to do an internship and then to be licensed you do another internship – I did it down here at the University of Maryland hospital.

It was the violence clinic, and that's where I worked with John Lyon.

I was always kind of interested in peace and violence and all this back-and-forth and interplay. I did see, in the past, instances of people who were supposedly for the peace movement and could do some pretty nasty things. I always wondered about that.

That was one of those seminal moments. Absolutely bizarre. If someone had filmed it, to see all the peace signs and all these things, and this poor guy on the ground. ...

What did you learn about your classmates?

They were so driven. As with a number of people during that time – or maybe it's any time – they become so convinced that what they're doing was right.

"You've just got to get out there; you can't be lukewarm in this. You work for peace and you do it, and demonstrate."

You know, when I was at Columbia, there was the taking over buildings and all these kinds of things. They saw it as part of their commitment to the whole cause of peace and ending the war.

You see someone you really love and like and you think, "What are you doing?" Then the whole crowd's coming up and they pound me over the head as well, so I thought, "This is going nowhere," and then the police are coming and it is turning into a regular circus.

Did you stay involved with the peace movement after that?

Oh very much so, very much so.

What changed in the Archdiocese of Baltimore over the 10 years you were

with the Catholic Near East Welfare Association?

There was a lot the same in the sense that I had kept in touch.

I would get back to the States probably about three times a year. When I was working in New York, I would come down frequently, always going to the different events.

I had priest friends here from the different parishes; I kept those relationships, and I would help out at the different parishes.

I was always in constant contact with Cardinal (William H.) Keeler throughout that whole time.

What was your reaction to being appointed auxiliary bishop of Baltimore?

It was a surprise for me. I had thought that the secretary general for the (Catholic Near East Welfare Association) was going to be appointed bishop. I think he would have been a good one. He's retired now.

I was very surprised when I was named, because I was the associate secretary general.

You were ordained as bishop Aug. 24, 2005, by Cardinal William H. Keeler. Were there any goals identified by the cardinal, yourself or others?

I think the cardinal - he did need another bishop. At that time I was the third bishop of Bishop (W. Francis) Malooly, Bishop (Mitchell T.) Rozanski and myself and the cardinal (Keeler).

He wanted to continue with the vicariate system. Basically, Bishop Malooly had the west and Bishop Rozanski had Baltimore County and Anne Arundel County.

The cardinal kind of wanted me to take the city - to be the urban vicar. He knew of my interest and desire to work in the city.

The other thing the cardinal encouraged me to keep up with was the interfaith and

ecumenical work in the archdiocese. He himself had always been very active in that. People in specific communities always asked about the cardinal and what he's doing.

Looking back over your last decade-plus as bishop, what do you look to in the archdiocese and say, "We did that right"?

There are a lot of things with the parishes, working with the poor especially.

It was not necessarily doing one particular thing that turned people's lives around, but it was kind of helping to set up things for people to get involved and do things in their community and in their parishes.

They would have some sense of changing things in the community, and that gave the people a sense of hope – a sense of self-respect.

I see that so much more now, being a bishop. During the 1970s, I used to live in a parish, St. Martin's Parish, at Fayette Street and Fulton Avenue. (Interviewer's note: St. Martin closed in 2008.)

At that time, that was a pretty rugged area. One block up is Monroe and Fayette, and that's a notorious spot. You know, that's always been a wild spot. But I see the priests in the city now, living right there with the people and doing so many things. I think that's something, and, some way or another, we all played a part in it.

I just think there's so much about the archdiocese.

The archdiocese, I think, is growing.

It's probably one of the most outstanding groups of priests – the presbyterate here is outstanding.

I've had an opportunity to live in a religious community, to live in New York when I was in school and see New York priests, and I liked them very much, and then out at Notre Dame, but I really think our priests make a good group.

That came out today. Father Mark Bialek's father died, and the funeral was at the Shrine of the Little Flower. It was something to see so many priests there. To me it was a great sign of respect and support and love, so it was wonderful.

You've always been particularly close to West Baltimore.

Yeah. That's because I started off living at (the former) St. Martin's on Fayette and Fulton. At that time they must have had Capuchins (Franciscan Friars) living there, and I think there was myself and another priest living there.

We helped at different parishes, and so I was working at St. Martin's and also at St. Gregory (the Great, in West Baltimore).

Those two were the most but we would also go to the other parishes - St. Cecilia, Immaculate Conception - all the churches on the west side.

What's kept you close to that part of town?

For my work overseas, I worked a lot with refugees and the poor. I think a lot of the same general kinds of issues you saw were the same things we faced in poorer sections of the city.

Also, as I said, when I first came to Baltimore, that was the first place I lived.

Also, I was doing my internship out at University of Maryland Medical Center, and I was on the faculty there for about 15 years while I was still doing my priestly work.

You saw a lot of poor people at these clinics; it always kept me sort of tied into these places.

You have a special affinity for prayer walks. If a secular colleague in the field of psychology asked what this accomplishes, how would you answer?

Even tonight we'll be down at Cherry Hill at St. Veronica's.

I think it helps the people who live in these areas to know they're not forgotten when we do these walks, just once a month.

The people are most appreciative. When you go and stop in front of a house, near where someone has been murdered, and when some of the families come out, they respond to you as if you had just arrived to make a visit at a funeral home. They

thank you for coming and thank you for giving your condolences. So I think that's one part of it.

Another part is that I think it's good for people who live outside the area to come and to see just where many of our people live, and under what conditions they live. A good number of people never come into those parts of the city. I'm not interested in them just seeing, but in them seeing and reflecting, and then, what would they like to do?

We have people coming from as far away as Emmitsburg coming on these prayer walks.

It's good for them – they don't necessarily have to then focus their efforts on West Baltimore, but on what's going on around them and perhaps the areas of their parish they're not so aware of.

For example, I just had confirmations out in Cumberland a few weeks ago. (Note: This portion of the interview took place in May 2016.) Cumberland has a significant number of homeless people, people on drugs, people who are unemployed and people who need to go to soup kitchens.

So I think those are, in one sense, kind of concrete things.

The big thing, though, is it's a matter of praying, asking God's blessings on the area, and asking God's blessings on the victims and the perpetrators, and that's what we do.

I mean, we never had any kind of a – “You know, if we do this for three years, there should be a 24 percent drop in crime in the city.” – nothing like that. It would be nice if (crime) goes down, but the sad part about it is there's never a dearth of places to visit and pray at.

Just tonight at St. Veronica's we said, “Oh yeah, there have been three murders in the last few months, and we'll stop at those sites when we go around.”

When we were at St. Cecilia's, we changed our route to go somewhere where just the night before someone was (killed). I like to think of it as a “drop in the bucket”

kind of thing.

Mother Teresa once said that.

Some reporter once asked her, "Isn't what you do - when you think of all the poverty, thinking about Calcutta - isn't it a drop in the bucket?"

And she said, "You're exactly right - it's just a drop in the bucket."

And I just think of when Pope Francis went to Lesbos. That camp he went to had 2,500 refugees in it. Over the course of a year - and there are several camps in Greece - 500,000 had gone through that one camp. And the pope, at the end of his stay, took back 12 refugees from three families.

That was surely a "drop in the bucket," but it was real.

I think about those things with these prayer walks. You keep chipping away at these places and just try to be a presence and try to carry Christ's blessings to that area.

It's interesting that we do this once a month, and it's become something that's notable in the archdiocese. We advertise it in the sense of getting people to come, but we don't do it in the sense of trying not to promote ourselves and things along those lines.

But people, they say, "Thank you for your prayer walks," so it has some meaning for people.

Sometimes I go to Atwater's and I'll be having soup and salad, and people will say, "Thank you for your prayer walks."

I don't even know who these people are!

When the vicariates were redrawn, you became vicar for Harford and Baltimore counties as well as the city. What do Catholics in these different areas and diverse circumstances share in common?

I think they share in common their faith. They all share in that same Eucharist and the celebration of the sacraments; they all share in trying in their way to lead a

Gospel life. They all share in that same belief in Christ. They share in the same love and desire to follow Pope Francis.

There's so much that unites us all. It's kind of like, in the very very basic things of life, there's a commonality.

We're there.

You have parishes that twin with each other. Hunt Valley (St. Francis Xavier) was twinning with St. Gregory's, for example. I'm not sure if they still are or not; they change back and forth. They would change pulpits back and forth, or they might take a busload or two busloads and go back and forth between each others' parishes.

It's just coming together. These are two diverse communities, yet able to just come together without having to do a whole lot to (answer), "What will we do when we get there?"

It just fits right in. The liturgy is different in the sense that church like St. Gregory's has an African-American liturgy, a different choir and a different spirit.

These are different, but, still, the basic stuff is the same.

Sometimes, they'll (twin) for awhile, supporting each other with Christmas clothing and gifts. Sometimes, they'll divert some of the money that comes in with the Archbishop's Annual Appeal to the parish they're twinning with - those kinds of things.

The churches in the archdiocese and the pastors are quite generous - in the usual things, collecting money for the Annual Appeal and these kinds of things, Catholic Charities - but they're also very, very generous in responding to the needs of other pastors in the city.

Can you complete this sentence? "I never would have guessed that serving as a bishop in the Baltimore Archdiocese would be so..."

The two words that come to mind are fulfilling and also challenging.

It is (more challenging than expected) because there are things you don't realize unless you're a bishop of an area.

What have been your most joyful moments as bishop?

One of the big things is the sacrament of confirmation. That's definitely a wonderful thing.

The other thing is visiting the parishes and being with the people, especially on some special occasions.

The other thing is having the opportunity to ordain, on occasion. I haven't ordained that many priests, but the ones I have ordained – and I've ordained a number of deacons as well – that's been very, very, very, very special.

Participating when the archbishop's ordaining – participating in these celebrations in the archdiocese has been quite fulfilling.

Your most sorrowful moments?

It still wracks my brain why we don't have more of our people not just coming to church, but you even have only 20 or 30 percent of our registered families coming – why is that so?

The other thing is seeing the way some people have to struggle with life, just the support of themselves and their church.

You go to some parishes that have large congregations; they have large staffs. You go to some parishes in the city and they have a staff of one. Sure they don't have the numbers, but they also don't have the financial wherewithal.

The sad part is seeing where many of our people live and under what circumstances they live.

If I want to go for a walk after dinner, I can do that. I live with the Sulpicians out by Loyola (University Maryland). I can go to Hopkins; I can walk around wherever.

For a lot of people, it's not even possible to just go out and take a stroll for themselves at night.

You've done a lot of confirmations. How many have you done?

I was just trying to figure that out the other day. It would probably be several thousand (youths total).

When they're preparing for confirmation, the confirmandi take a certain number of classes, do works of charity and go on retreat.

In one sense, it's very inspiring because they get worked up and write letters. I read a lot of letters.

Is it a letter of intent or something like that?

Something like that, where they tell why they think they should be confirmed, and they tell you something about themselves and something about the program they're in.

It's so great - this one young man wrote, "When I thought of the retreat, I had one thing on my mind and one thing on my mind only," then there's a space, "leaving."
(Laughs)

And then he talks about how after going through the experience he couldn't leave and didn't want to leave.

And another woman says, "How come you say that - 'volunteer' services. You encourage our 'voluntary' services. They're not voluntary; if we don't do them, we don't get confirmed. So it's not voluntary."

(Laughs)

Then she said, "I'm so glad I had to do them."

A lot of times they don't see this as something they want to do.

One young man wrote, "I was dreading the retreat. Two days of nothing but Jesus - I didn't think I could take it."

But then he couldn't get enough of it.

You see within a relatively quick period what happens to people when God's grace comes and they just open themselves up, even if it was a bit "at gunpoint" that they had to do these things. And it changes them.

And there was that wonderful spirit that they have. It's very uplifting.

Some parishes - not a whole lot, but some parishes - continue these programs after confirmation. I think that's a good idea; it's an opportunity to do works.

Some come on as peer ministers after.