

Monsignor Miller, ‘mountain of a man,’ laid to rest

By George P. Matysek Jr.

gmatysek@CatholicReview.org

Twitter: @ReviewMatysek

When the white-gloved pallbearers carrying Monsignor Edward M. Miller’s wooden casket reached the grand bronze doors of the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Homeland at the end of a two-hour funeral Mass Dec. 19, they shouted in unison at the top of their lungs.

“I just can’t stop praising His name!” they exclaimed repeatedly as a Gospel choir led more than 1,000 people in a spiritual inside the cathedral.

“Jesus!” they said. “Jesus!”

The joyous moment quickly turned serene when nearly 70 vested priests and 16 deacons chanted the traditional “Salve Regina” in Latin outside the cathedral.

With the church bell tolling and vestments fluttering in a gentle breeze, the clergymen intoned the Marian prayer as a final farewell to the longtime pastor of St. Bernardine in West Baltimore before he would be buried at New Cathedral Cemetery.

The blending of traditions seemed a fitting tribute to a priest who crossed cultural boundaries to spread the Gospel.

Monsignor Miller, a white man who spent the majority of his priesthood ministering in the African-American community, died Dec. 15 of an apparent heart attack. The 68-year-old priest had served St. Bernardine for 38 years, swelling the size of the congregation from just 200 people when he arrived to approximately 1,500 families today.

To view a slideshow from the event, navigate the arrows below.

“For 42 years, Ed faithfully fulfilled his ministry as a priest with great love and great enthusiasm,” said Bishop Denis J. Madden in a homily that was occasionally interrupted by applause. “He was, you might say, faithful to the very end, passing on as he did, with jacket on, making his way to church to offer the Sunday morning Mass.”

Bishop Madden cited a column about Monsignor Miller written by Father Joseph Breighner in a recent issue of the Catholic Review. It recounts how children at St. Bernardine are invited to write on their church envelopes the good deeds they did for God that week. One youngster wrote, “I used my lunch money to buy food for a

hungry dog.”

Inspired by the boy’s generosity, Monsignor Miller wrote the youngster a letter and enclosed a \$5 bill. Later, at a parish ministry fair, the boy’s mother asked her son what ministry he would like to join. Without hesitation, Bishop Madden recounted, the boy said, “I want to be a priest, just like Father Miller.”

“We all want to be priests like Father Miller,” Bishop Madden said. “We all want to be Christians like Father Miller.”

Bishop Madden said Monsignor Miller often told him that it was a “great joy” to be a priest and that helping people come to know the Lord was the best he could ever hope for in life.

Whenever Bishop Madden participated in prayer walks at St. Bernardine, processing around blocks where acts of violence had been committed, Monsignor Miller gave spiritual reflections.

“I was always so moved at the manner in which Ed would speak about the particular event that took place at one of our stops,” Bishop Madden said. “He would speak with such evident and empathetic love for the people of the surrounding neighborhood. They were his people.”

Monsignor Miller reminded everyone, Bishop Madden said, that even in times of trouble, God provides “rich food and choice wines.”

“This is what that mountain of a man revealed to us with his words and even more so with his life,” Bishop Madden said.

A large showing of St. Bernardine’s parishioners turned out for their pastor’s funeral, with the Gospel choir leading the music and ushers welcoming guests. Archbishop William E. Lori, celebrant, told them to think of the cathedral as “a larger version of St. Bernardine” on that day.

The archbishop commended Monsignor Miller for “giving his all to the community of West Baltimore.” He drew laughter when he noted that Monsignor Miller, a Baltimore native, offered to teach the archbishop a few things when he first came to Charm City.

“I’m rhythmically challenged,” Archbishop Lori said. “I don’t know when or how to clap. I can’t carry a tune in a bucket. And, for the life of me, I can’t figure out how to open crabs.”

The archbishop said the one thing he does right is root for the Orioles, Monsignor Miller’s favorite sports team.

Those paying their respects to Monsignor Miller told the Catholic Review they were overwhelmed by his love for his congregation.

Marion Masseaux, who grew up in St. Bernardine Parish and now worships at St. Edward in West Baltimore, remembered that Monsignor Miller buried her mother in Pittsburgh when he happened to be on vacation there watching a Steelers game.

"He was just loved from the minute he got to St. Bernardine's," she said.

Masseaux noted that Monsignor Miller took time to study the African-American culture. He traveled to the South to learn to preach in a way that would relate to his parishioners, she said.

"He was an absolutely fabulous preacher," she said. "He was a man of God."

Felice Smalls, a St. Bernardine parishioner, said Monsignor Miller often preached about seeking first the Kingdom of God. Her fondest memory of him is how at the end of Mass, he would always shake her hand and give her a kiss. He was always happy and always smiling, she said.

"He would always ask how my mother is doing in Florida," Smalls said. "It's just so sad that he's suddenly gone. It doesn't seem real."

Jameece Chase, also of St. Bernardine, was confirmed by Monsignor Miller. He also baptized her mother at St. Ambrose in Park Heights.

"He was like a part of our family," she said. "He was there for all my family funerals. He had a great spirit."

Joining Archbishop Lori and Bishop Madden at the funeral Mass were Cardinal Edwin F. O'Brien, Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski and Bishop William C. Newman. Other dignitaries included former Congressman Kweisi Mfume, Del. Samuel Rosenberg, Baltimore City Councilman William "Pete" Welch and his mother, Agnes Welch, a former councilwoman. A representative of Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake also attended, as did members of Monsignor Miller's family, including his brother, Holy Cross Brother James Miller.

The archbishop postponed a previously scheduled Christmas party he throws annually for employees of the Catholic Center and the Catholic Review in Baltimore to give them an opportunity to attend the funeral.

At different moments in the liturgy, many congregants raised their arms in praise or spontaneously applauded when they were moved by the music, homily or Scripture reading.

Bishop Madden reminded them that Monsignor Miller, whom he called a "noble soul," is now with the Lord.

"My dear friends, let us thank the Lord for sending us such a wonderful priest and pastor who has brought the light of Christ into our lives," he said.

Also see:

Monsignor Slade Catholic School community rallies around student, family
Pope celebrates his birthday by having breakfast with homeless men