

Pope picked fellow ‘street priest’ when he named his almoner a cardinal

VATICAN CITY — Realizing he could no longer minister directly to poor people as he used to in Buenos Aires, a newly elected Pope Francis found another secret “street priest” to act in his place — Cardinal-designate Konrad Krajewski.

For years, this Polish assistant to St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI walked Rome’s streets offering meals and assistance, often accompanied by volunteers from the papal Swiss Guard.

“My arms have been shortened,” he said Pope Francis remarked when explaining why he was naming him papal almoner.

“If we can make my arms longer with your arms, I will be able to touch the poor of Rome and in Italy. I can’t leave. You can,” the pope explained.

By elevating him to the College of Cardinals June 28, the pope is elevating the office of papal almoner, the 54-year-old liturgist told Vatican News May 20. This honor “is for the poor and the volunteers. I can take no credit,” he said.

“I only did what the Holy Father wanted,” he explained, which was to be the pope’s eyes, ears and hands, looking out for and offering direct assistance to those in need, as well as spiritual comfort and prayers.

Every morning he reads requests for help forwarded from the pope with a comment that says, “You know what you must do.”

“And so I try to think, what would Francis do if he were here?” he told the Italian magazine, *Il Mio Papa*.

As papal almoner, the Polish cardinal-designate distributes charitable aid from the pope; but he has taken the job to a whole new level, getting a dormitory, showers, a

barbershop and laundromat set up near the Vatican for homeless people. He handed out 1,600 prepaid phone cards to refugees who survived a dangerous journey by boat to Lampedusa to let their families know they were safe. He's also organized special private tours for poor and homeless people to the Vatican Gardens, the Vatican Museums and the Sistine Chapel.

Receiving the red hat should not make a big difference in his day-to-day dealings, he told Vatican Insider. He already had enough clout just being the pope's almoner. "When they give me donations for the poor, they have trust because they trust the pope," he said.

Cardinal-designate Krajewski said Pope Francis told him to sell his desk when he was hired because his job wasn't to wait for people to come ringing, but to go out and look for those in need. The cardinal-designate went a step further, giving up his apartment for a time to a Syrian refugee family.

He said the pope wanted him to do what he had been free to do in Buenos Aires: to seek out, share with and be there for people.

"'You will see,' he told me, 'I have entrusted you with the most beautiful part' of being a priest, the cardinal-designate said.

Born in Lodz, Poland, Nov. 25, 1963, the cardinal-designate studied in Poland and Rome, where he earned degrees in theology and sacred liturgy. He served as a hospital chaplain in Rome before returning to Lodz to teach liturgy at local seminaries and become prefect of the diocesan seminary.

He returned to Rome in 1998 to work in the Vatican's office of papal liturgical celebrations and master of liturgical ceremonies from 1999 to 2013 when he could be seen at the side of St. John Paul and Pope Benedict assisting during papal Masses.

He was appointed papal almoner August 2013 and consecrated a bishop the next month, taking the Latin word for "mercy" as his motto.

He told journalists in late November 2013 that he had been one of the four men who dressed St. John Paul after he died, in preparation for his lying-in-state and funeral.

“Perhaps this is why I never devoted myself to praying intensely for his beatification because I had already begun to take part in it,” he said, speaking of his fellow-countryman, whom he had served for seven years.

A former recreational skier and swimmer in his native Poland — like the pope-saint — the cardinal-designate said he also tried to emulate St. John Paul with a strong life of prayer so as to be close to God. He celebrates Mass at the late pope’s tomb once a week and prays the rosary and hears confessions every day at a nearby church dedicated to the Divine Mercy.

He said Pope Francis once told him to never stop hearing confessions because that, too, is a kind of alms.

Despite always being in the thick of things — delivering food or sleeping bags, visiting the infirm and families in crisis — Cardinal-designate Krajewski said he prefers to stay off the radar and avoid giving interviews.

“I’d like to stay hidden, without any ruckus,” he told the Catholic magazine *Famiglia Cristiana* in 2014, explaining why he was turning them down for an interview request. “Poverty is something serious; it’s not there to give oneself publicity.”

But what he does not hide is his faith. “It is helpful for the church when we do not hide God, but we reveal him with our lifestyle,” he told the magazine reporter. Doing good “is contagious,” he said.

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