

Q&A with Baltimore native Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski

By George P. Matysek Jr.

gmatysek@CatholicReview.org

Nearly four weeks after Pope Francis named Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski the ninth bishop of the Diocese of Springfield, Mass., the native Baltimorean and longtime auxiliary bishop for the Archdiocese of Baltimore sat down with the Catholic Review July 2 to discuss how Baltimore shaped his approach to ministry, his role as a bishop and his vision for sharing the faith.

The following is excerpted from that interview, edited for length and clarity.

Q. It's been a few weeks since the appointment. Has it all sunk in?

A. After 30 years of priesthood – 10 as a bishop – Baltimore is very familiar to me, of course, being here all my life. I'm happy to know that there's a bit of a geographic similarity between what we have in the Archdiocese of Baltimore in terms of Baltimore and Western Maryland and then Springfield and the western part of the state. I look forward to knowing that geography in western Massachusetts. Our farthest parish here is in Oakland, a three-and-a-half hour ride from Baltimore, and I was told that in western Massachusetts, the farthest parish from Springfield is only an hour and a half. It's a bit more compact up there.



(Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)

Q. You've been so closely connected to Baltimore. What are you going to miss most?

A. Gosh, first of all, family, friends and classmates. I'll miss being able to get together with friends at little notice. I will miss the church here in Baltimore because it has formed me so well over the years. I've learned not only from my seminary training, but also being newly ordained and being ordained a bishop. All of that has formed me and my experiences and that's so tied with Baltimore. I will definitely miss the church in Baltimore. It's very vibrant. It's very active. Working with the Hispanic community, they have brought a new element to my life – a vibrancy in liturgy and also a very, very close sense of family that I think in the wider community we need to recapture in our own lives. All of that I will miss.

Q. You grew up at Sacred Heart of Mary in Graceland Park, where I know you were very close with the pastor, the late Monsignor Richard Parks. How did he influence your priesthood?

A. He came to Sacred Heart of Mary when I was 12. He had such a joy in being a priest. He put the “e” in extrovert. Everybody in the community knew him - Catholics and non-Catholics. Always, he had a sense of humor and a sense of delight in being a priest. I think he was very influential, as well as the other priests in the parish. They were very devoted to their people and service to their people, and that really impressed me. I was an altar boy and a lector. I also worked in the rectory when I was there. I was very active in the parish.

Q. What attracted you to the priesthood?

A. There were so many different facets to the priesthood that attracted me. One was being a leader of liturgy, a leader of worship and a leader of prayer. Whenever I saw the priest in that role, plus being a leader of prayer at crucial times in people’s lives, that just really impressed me how deeply the presence of the priest was felt by the people.

The other big influence upon me was the fact that the priests at my parish really related to a whole variety of ages - from the young to families to the elderly and everyone in between. I always felt close to God and steeped in faith. I felt that God had been calling me. Once I started in the seminary, I didn’t think of doing anything else.



(Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)

Q. Are there one or two moments that really stand out in your priesthood, that had a deep impact on you?

A. I was temporary administrator of Immaculate Conception in Towson. I believe I had the second Saturday Mass one evening, and there was a woman who stopped me after that Mass and asked me if I would stop to hear her confession even though she knew it wasn’t on the schedule. I asked her if she would let me un-vest and I’d meet her in the confessional. Something told me that this was important. Later that week, another woman saw me after daily Mass and said to me, “Do you remember that lady who approached you the other Saturday evening for confession? Well, that evening, she died.”

I just thank God that I was able to stop and let her go to confession and to know she went to heaven with a clear conscience.

There are so many stories like that in all priests’ lives. The great joy of the priesthood is that we are privileged to be in people’s lives at such crucial moments of their own lives - weddings, baptisms, funerals. As a bishop, we are with people at confirmation to seal them in the Holy Spirit. We are given that privilege of being so much a part of people’s lives at crucial times. That’s the one thing I missed in transitioning from being a parish priest to a bishop - being close to the people, being

part of a community and a leader of a stable community, such as a parish community. As auxiliary bishop, I would be at a different church almost every weekend.

Q. Your path to becoming a bishop is a bit unusual in that your prior experience was solely as a parish priest. How will that pastoral experience shape your approach to leadership?

A. I am grateful for the 20 years I had in different parish experiences in Baltimore City, Baltimore County and Anne Arundel County. I'm grateful for these 10 years as auxiliary bishop to work with the three archbishops - Cardinal (William H.) Keeler, Cardinal (Edwin F.) O'Brien and Archbishop (William E.) Lori. They have taught me a lot about what it means to be a bishop. The most important thing I've learned in priesthood and in being a bishop is that it all has to be rooted in prayer. By being rooted in prayer, there is that guidance of the Holy Spirit that helps in decisions. There's also a spirit of listening to others and getting as much input as I can before making those decisions - and realizing that once a decision is made, not everyone is going to agree with the decision, but that's part of leadership today and that's part of what it means to be a father and a bishop and a shepherd.

Q. How would you describe your approach to leadership?

A. Hopefully in today's church, there is a collaborative approach to leadership, of being able to work with the people of God, with my fellow priests, deacons, men and women religious and being able to hear their input, to listen to their input. Making decisions that are well-informed really should be the hallmark of leadership today, especially church leadership.



(Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)

Q. You were the first Polish-American bishop in Baltimore. You will be the first Polish-American bishop in Springfield. What impact does your Polish upbringing have on your faith?

A. The culture of the Poles and the faith of the Poles are almost inseparable. So, I find that growing up in a home steeped in Polish culture was (one) also steeped in faith. I know there are a lot of different cultures in Springfield, and I hope to be present to all of them.

Q. In many ways, and you know this more than anyone, the church is very divided these days. Bishops are pulled in a lot of different directions politically and otherwise. What can you do as a leader to encourage the healing of those divisions?

A. I think the key to that really goes to something that Pope Francis has been saying. When we turn inward, we're really not fulfilling our mission of the church. So, those

divisions and those controversies really come from turning inward. We have to turn outward. When we turn outward and when we're living the Gospel message of the Lord Jesus, then we are able to overcome divisions, to realize that those divisions that almost seem insurmountable really aren't that insurmountable when we're working together, evangelizing and reaching outward. The bishop's role as shepherd is to always keep us looking outward and not letting us turn inward on ourselves.

Q. What do you think of what Pope Francis is doing in encouraging new faces to come into the church or at least be open to the church?

A. I think Pope Francis has set up a wonderful opportunity to first of all let the Gospel message be known by living the Gospel message. He's leading by example. His example is not only for bishops, priests or deacons, his example is really for all of us. I think the reaction to Pope Francis by many people – Catholics and non-Catholics alike – is that they see an authenticity in the way he lives the Gospel message and, in that authenticity, they're attracted to it.

Q. Do you have any initial goals or areas of focus as you get started in Springfield?

A. There was a devastating tornado that went through on June 1 in 2011. It destroyed what was their priest retirement home and Cathedral High School. There are still decisions that need to be made about Cathedral High School. I have to listen and take in as much information as I can with a lot of prayer. They have about 300 students in the high school. After the tornado, they had to move into another building. They are renting a public high school, which is a little bit out of the area of Springfield. They are looking forward to having a decision on how the school is going to be rebuilt.

Q. How many priests are in Springfield?

A. I believe there are 181, but that includes diocesan and religious-order priests. I was reminded that three of the parishes are staffed by the Conventual Franciscans, who have their headquarters here in Ellicott City. I was glad to hear that.



(Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)

Q. As part of the pastoral planning you undertook in Western Maryland, it seemed as though you were encouraging the parishes to come to their own solutions in finding ways of dealing with a declining population and stretched resources. Is that a fair assessment?

A. I think it's asking those who are really at the parish level to come up with ideas, make suggestions, and help to forge the way ahead for themselves as they did in Western Maryland.

Q. Were you pleased with the outcome with the Cumberland-area parishes, with the final way that came about in joining five different parishes together to form one new parish, Our Lady of the Mountains?

A. I was pleased because we worked with the Capuchin Franciscans, presented to their governance different models of parish that we were thinking of and we asked them if they would be comfortable with those models. Once they agreed, then we moved forward. I felt that we had tried to include as many people as we could on those decisions. The goal of that is that the final outcome is not a surprise. Rather, it's really a fulfillment of the process that takes place in discernment in parish leadership and parish governance.

Q. Springfield has gone through some of that, correct? Didn't they recently close a good number of parishes?

A. They went from 135 to 81 parishes, so they had gone through that process. They had been studying it for years and then, under Bishop (Timothy A.) McDonnell's leadership, they were able to bring that study process to its fulfillment.

Every diocese in the northeast is going through some sort of reorganization or restructuring and has been for the past 30 years. What you have to realize is our faith, our church and especially our structures of parish are organic. We have to be where the people are. I would compare it to a family that has a large house and when they have children and all, you need the large house. The children move away and it's only the original couple, then sometimes you need to downsize. The church isn't different from family.

Q. What would you say to someone considering the priesthood or religious life?

A. As I look back on the last 30 years, I just feel greatly blessed to have been called to the priesthood and to be able to minister to God's people - whether it was in the parishes or whether it was in this office as auxiliary bishop. I would encourage young men who feel the calling of a vocation to ordained ministry to pray about it, to think about it and to not be afraid to respond to the call of God - as I would encourage any young woman in considering religious life. I think that the world just doesn't offer the fulfillment that is part of this, of being able to serve God's people in the church.

Q. One final question - and this may be most difficult. You are moving to another city in the AL East. Are you going to root for the Red Sox or are you going to remain an Orioles' fan?

A. (Laughs) Well, I'm going to have to reserve judgment on that. After 55 years of being a Baltimorean and with the allegiance to our sports teams, that will be a big leap. I can accept the Holy Father's will and appointment to the Diocese of Springfield. We are going to have to work on seeing where the allegiance goes with

the sports teams. That might be a little more difficult leap of faith for me.

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