

Questions and answers with Bishop Malooly

Three weeks after Pope Benedict XVI named Bishop W. Francis Malooly the new bishop of the Diocese of Wilmington, Del., Baltimore's native son sat down with The Catholic Review July 28 to discuss his role as a bishop, his goals for his new diocese and his thoughts about the state of today's church.

The interview was conducted by George P. Matysek Jr., staff correspondent, and took place in Bishop Malooly's seventh-floor office at the Catholic Center overlooking downtown Baltimore.

As the western vicar prepared for his Sept. 8 installation in Wilmington, he reflected on how his time in Baltimore prepared him for his new role and the unique challenges that face church leaders. What follows are excerpts from that conversation.

CR: How did you hear the news that you're going to be the new bishop of Wilmington?

Bishop Malooly: I actually got a phone call from Archbishop (Pietro) Sambini (apostolic nuncio), exactly a month to the day before the announcement. It was that first Monday in June and he said the Holy Father wanted to appoint me and asked if I would accept and I said certainly.

CR: What was your reaction when you got that call?

Bishop Malooly: I was not overly surprised because I knew that there were a lot of rumors that I'd be moving on to another diocese. I saw that happen with Bishop Kevin Farrell after Archbishop (Donald) Wuerl took over in Washington, which wouldn't be unusual.

I've been doing the moderator of the curia and vicar general job here for 20 years and I'm on my third archbishop, so it would be logical to move on and to let the

archbishop establish his own staff in Baltimore.

I was pleasantly surprised that it was Wilmington because I know so much about Wilmington. Bishop (Michael) Saltarelli has been a great friend and he's not someone you want to replace, but, on the other hand, many of the pastoral skills he has are the same package I have. The learning curve of people about me and vice versa will probably be pretty easy.

CR: What's your impression of the Diocese of Wilmington so far?

Bishop Malooly: I really like it. I'm not as familiar with Wilmington as I am with Bethany and Ocean City and Salisbury, but I really like it. It seems less hectic. People are very friendly. I know the priests. The morale and the upbeat nature of the priests has always impressed me. I saw that the day of the announcement. I met many of the pastoral staff people, and I was very impressed with them. It's smaller than here, obviously. It seems like maybe a third to half the size of the number of people I work with here. It will be nice to live only a couple minutes away from the pastoral center. For the first time in my 25 years of being in administration, I won't have to cope with rush-hour traffic, so that will be good.

CR: You worked very closely with Archbishop William D. Borders, Cardinal William H. Keeler and Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien. Some call you their right-hand man. What have you learned from each of them that will help you in your new position?

Bishop Malooly: Each brings different gifts. I've tried to make as much of what they've shared with me my own. They were all three very spiritual, very good leaders and very upbeat. They were very happy about what they do and that's part of my nature anyway.

CR: How would describe your approach to leadership?

Bishop Malooly: Down here, I've always said I'm kind of like the band leader. I have a lot of competent people around me. I'm going to find the same thing there. I just need to learn (about the) capable people around me and enable them to continue to do their ministry. Bishop Saltarelli has run a wonderful

diocese during his time there. His predecessors before him did the same thing. So probably, I will go and listen and learn.

I always advise pastors when I install them to take a year to listen and look and see what makes the parish runs effectively – see how they’ve done that before you make any changes or give new direction. My intent will be the same in Wilmington.

CR: As an auxiliary bishop, you have experienced being pulled in different directions from conservative and liberal factions. You’re probably going to experience that even more as head of your own diocese. How do you deal with that?

Bishop Malooly: With the cardinal being so involved nationally and internationally in the last years of his administration and also having the knee surgery, I was in the middle of things here. I’m aware of those experiences. You try to be responsive to everyone. People on the extreme sides have strong feelings – and for good reasons, in most cases – so you try to be responsive and try to steer the ship as safely as possible.

CR: Are there specific issues you’d like to address in the legislature?

Bishop Malooly: Well, we’re in the middle of this (sex abuse) settlement because the Delaware Legislature opened up a window of opportunity for those who have been abused by members of the church (to seek damages). They didn’t open it up for those who are abused by members of the public sector, the public schools, and so on.

I will take time to respond to all of those things happening, and I want to learn more about the Legislature and how they represent people because obviously it’s important. I want my vote to count.

CR: Are you concerned about what kind of impact the settlement is going to have on the parishes?

Bishop Malooly: That’s a good question. Certainly it’s going to have an impact. You can’t have big settlements or big suits and not have to cut back something. With the installation, we’re trying to be as cost-conscious as possible and as streamlined as possible because it’s not a time to be

spending money. I know the bishop is running things well so there's no question that the course is going in the right direction. Sometimes in trying to reach out to others, as the Legislature has told us to do in this case, you are going to miss a lot of people who really need help now. And all the money in the world is not going to make up for the travesty of child abuse. But if it helps in the healing process, that's what we have to do.

CR: You have been active in reaching out to victims of sexual abuse in Baltimore. Will you continue that in Wilmington?

Bishop Malooly: Yes, I'll be available to everyone in the diocese to the best of my ability and to the best of my schedule, and if it's helpful for the victims there to talk to the new bishop, I certainly want to be available. I know many wanted to speak to Archbishop O'Brien when he came here.

CR: What's the biggest challenge for the diocese in the coming years?

Bishop Malooly: We're all talking about evangelization, about reaching out to Catholics who have been disaffected by the church or who have slipped through the cracks. We have the year of St. Paul, so it's an ideal time to think about reaching out as Paul did. Bishop Saltarelli has written a beautiful pastoral letter for the year of St. Paul and I studied that closely. I certainly want to continue the process. I want to make the church as positive and upbeat and happy as possible. I want the parishes and priests to be welcoming - as they already are - but to be conscious of that all the time.

CR: Your new diocese has grown a lot in the last 10 years at a time when the number of priests has declined. Have you given some thought to how you're going to staff parishes?

Bishop Malooly: At the present time, we're still in good shape there. The guys who are ordained aren't rushed into being administrators and pastors. It's a happy prebyterate, as ours are here, too. Encouraging vocations to the priesthood and religious life is high on the list, as it was for Bishop Saltarelli. We want to make our Catholic schools as strong as possible. We've had some merging of schools in the city, much as we have had in

Baltimore. We need to find ways of making Catholic schools affordable and available to those who want it. That's an effort that is nationwide. As you said, the diocese is growing. We're seeing growth and increase, and that's a good sign.

CR: Do they have pastoral life directors in Wilmington?

Bishop Malooly: I'm not aware. I looked through the directory and I don't see that, so that's another sign that the number of priests right now is pretty stable. There are not a great number of priests in the large parishes, but the priestly coverage seems to be there.

CR: What do you think people are looking for in the church today?

Bishop Malooly: I think they're looking for some consistency, some challenge about how to better live life. They're looking for a warm worshiping community and support in a very secular, distant kind of world at times. I think they're looking for good leadership, good spiritual direction. I think a lot of people are looking for those things but they don't know it and we need to reacquaint them with the church for their own sake and the betterment of the church. The more people we have in church, the more we can do to reach out to those who have special needs and that would be helpful to us.

CR: Your motto is "Rejoice in the Lord." Why do you rejoice in the Lord?

Bishop Malooly: I love what I'm doing and I see the benefits of helping people. At a funeral, being able to support a family at a moment like that when a mother dies suddenly after only three months of illness - it's those things, those moments when you can be a part of people's lives. It's being convinced that this life is just the beginning and eternity sits in front, so make the most of each day here knowing that I'm not going to live forever. There's no reason I wouldn't be happy about that. I want to make that known to other people.

CR: How can you get more priests to convey that joy to others?

Bishop Malooly: There are many stresses and strains in ministry and administration. We can make it easier for them with business managers and others who can take on some of the responsibilities that do take a lot of time and energy - so the priests and religious can be basically involved in ministry. I think that's the way to go.

I've noticed here in Baltimore that the assigned priests with pastoral life directors just rejoice because they can do ministry and are not saddled with administration - not that administration is bad - but it just frees them up. We've talked about that throughout the country with the National Association of Personnel Administrators since the late '70s. It's a struggle, but we keep on working on providing ministry and giving priests a chance to do that with as few stresses as possible.

CR: What's the hardest part of being a bishop?

Bishop Malooly: When I became a bishop, it was kind of freeing because I had been the vicar general for 11 years and I was able to add the role of bishop, which gave me the chance to pastor a vicariate, celebrate confirmations and be with people in the parish and ordain priests - which is most enjoyable. So being a bishop was all the good things. I guess if I hadn't been an administrator, and I was picking up a lot of administration, it might be more complex, but since I had been doing it for so many years it was icing on the cake. I had enjoyed doing parish ministry where I lived at St. Thomas More, but it was just nice to get around to so many parishes as a bishop, especially with the young people.

CR: Is there anything you've learned from your experience in the western vicariate that's going to help you in your role as bishop of Wilmington?

Bishop Malooly: (Smiles) No, because it's all mountains there and the land is all flat in Wilmington. I think it's about two hours and 30 minutes from the bishop's residence to Pocomoke, Westover or the end of the Maryland shore. As you know, it's about two hours and 15 minutes to get to Cumberland. Now, the one advantage with Cumberland over Pocomoke is that there are no red lights along the way until you get into the town. But the nice advantage of the Wilmington diocese is driving through the small

towns.

CR: Do you expect to do much outreach to the Spanish-speaking population?

Bishop Malooly: I've already asked Bishop Saltarelli if he can find someone to help me with my Spanish - to get beyond "buenos dias" and to get to something a little bit more engaging. I'll probably have one-on-one lessons to help me. It's critical today in the church. There could be as many as 40,000 Hispanic Catholics in the Wilmington diocese out of about 220,000 Catholics.

CR: How do the schools look in Wilmington?

Bishop Malooly: I hear very good things about the schools. There's always that tension between having enough students and the right tuition and being able to compensate the teachers. There's a need in all areas. I know Bishop Saltarelli has started a campaign to raise money for tuition assistance. I think he has a \$6 million goal and he's made some headway on that already, so I'll take that up and continue to either carry it or work with him. It is a critical need. The Catholic schools give us not only great education, but a great sense of the Catholic culture and can be a great resource to parents.

CR: What have people said to you since you have been appointed bishop of Wilmington?

Bishop Malooly: One out of three people who have congratulated me tell me I'm their summer bishop because they have places in Bethany or Ocean City or they have family or relatives who moved there. There's still a strong connection with my roots and my predecessors. It's an exciting time for me.

CR: What are you most looking forward to in your new role?

Bishop Malooly: I'm looking forward to getting started. You know, this will be my last assignment, and I've been in administration here for 25 years now and the same ministry for almost 20 years as vicar general, so I'm looking forward to getting started and getting to meet people. I've met a number

already. I feel energized by it. It's a wonderful opportunity for me.