

Retired Father Bochenek still shares wit, bedside manner

Antsy worshippers squirmed when Father Joseph G. Bochenek got to the Prayer of the Faithful, which for him involved a roll call of the sick or hospitalized, often more than 40 names.

“Some were upset,” Father Bochenek said. “They’d ask, ‘Why don’t you just print the names?’ I did, and I still said them, because there’s a story behind each person.”

His own entered another phase in June, when Father Bochenek retired after 29 years as pastor of St. Brigid in Canton. The 72-year-old priest continues to share his gifts, which include bad puns, a self-deprecating wit and extremely sharp recall.

He graduated “magna cum lucky” in 1963 from Mount St. Joseph High School in Irvington. Eight years later, about to be ordained an archdiocesan priest alongside men with names such as Breighner, Delclos and Roach, he overheard some curious chatter.

“We were standing in the vestibule in the cathedral,” Father Bochenek said. “One of the Sulpicians looking at our biographies in the Catholic Review said, ‘Don’t expect much from this class.’ ”

His mother had pulled him aside the night before and shared a secret that might explain his affinity for visiting nursing homes and the housebound.

“She said, ‘I had a difficult time carrying you, doctors didn’t give you much of a chance of living beyond 12.’ That explained why mother was overly protective,” Father Bochenek said.

He compensated by “going after the “toughest son of a gun” playing sandlot football, or, at the request of the Baltimore County Police, entering an Essex household in 1974 while an intoxicated husband held his wife hostage.

“When I got back to the rectory (at St. Clement Mary Hofbauer in Rosedale), the pastor, said ‘dumb, dumb, dumb, dumb.’ I was very young and naïve.”

He credits some of his commitment to another late priest, Father Stanley Janaites, the pastor of his boyhood at St. Patrick in Fells Point.

“He was my mentor,” Father Bochenek said. “At night, he would visit the sick. Anytime there was a crisis or emergency, he would drop everything and go. If I were to become a priest, I would be like that.”

His nearly three decades at St. Brigid came as the city was being transformed.

“From the 1960s to the 1980s, an estimated 100,000 Catholic families moved out of the city, and a majority of them were from East Baltimore,” Father Bochenek said.

He went from observing commuters from the suburbs dropping off their children at a Catholic school and picking them up in the evening from a grandparent in the neighborhood; to those grandparents needing care; to those same parents now asking him “to look out for my kid” as their millennial children move in.

Father Bochenek was among the students at a karate school housed at St. Brigid. With the help of pastoral associate Bette Brocato, who took on countless administrative tasks, they organized a fundraiser that involved hundreds of volunteers serving as “hospitality ministers” at the Preakness.

Parish friends included Sunny McCusker, the owner of Nacho Mama’s. His 2012 funeral Mass at the cathedral included the hearse following a National Bohemian

beer truck, with Father Bochenek and the aforementioned Father Michael Roach as concelebrants.

“He (Father Bochenek) delighted in seeing the rise of the old neighborhood again,” Father Roach said. “His sanctuary was replete with water scenes, Veterans Day homages and every liturgical season’s decoration. He loved his people and was intensely loyal to them.”

Father Bochenek’s ministry included stops at Our Lady of Victory in Arbutus and Immaculate Heart of Mary in Baynesville. These days he’s residing at Our Lady of Pompei in Highlandtown. He celebrates Sunday 8 a.m. Mass there, and Friday 10:30 a.m. Mass at a nursing home in Catonsville.

“My retirement hasn’t sunk in yet,” he said. “I’m keeping busy. There’s a lot of gas left in the tank.”

Email Paul McMullen at pmcmullen@CatholicReview.org.