

# St. Alphonsus Shrine entrusted to Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter

Only in the city two months, Father Joel E. Kiefer has already become a familiar presence in downtown Baltimore.

Wearing his buttoned-down black cassock, the stocky West Point graduate regularly walks the streets and alleys surrounding the **National Shrine of St. Alphonsus Ligouri**. Holding his rosary, the 47-year-old priest prays the Marian devotion as part of what he calls a “ministry of presence.”

“Conversations happen every block,” said Father Kiefer, a member of the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter who began his duties as administrator of St. Alphonsus Aug. 1. “Many times, people want to pray right there on the spot.”

The Philadelphia native has fielded questions about why God would let a woman’s granddaughter die. Others have asked for material assistance or sought divine help finding a job.

“It’s about being an encouragement to the people,” he said.

St. Alphonsus Parish and its priests have long been spiritual beacons in the city. Founded in 1845 by the Redemptorists to serve the German community, St. Alphonsus counts St. John Neumann and Blessed Francis X. Seelos among its former pastors.

After the German population dispersed in the early 20th century, the Redemptorists left the parish in 1917, and St. Alphonsus became the area’s Lithuanian parish.

In the 1990s, Cardinal William H. Keeler designated St. Alphonsus as the Baltimore home of the Tridentine Mass, the traditional Latin Mass celebrated according to the 1962 Roman Missal.

Following the recent **retirement** of Monsignor Arthur Bastress, P.A., who served as St. Alphonsus’ pastor for nearly two decades, Archbishop William E. Lori entrusted

the shrine to the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter (F.S.S.P.).

Founded in 1988 at the Abbey of Hauterive in Switzerland, the fraternity is a community of priests who receive special training in the traditional liturgy of the Roman rite. The F.S.S.P. staffs 50 parishes in the United States and Canada, and operates seminaries in Wigratzbad, Germany, and Denton, Neb.

Every Sunday, Father Kiefer celebrates the Tridentine Mass at St. Alphonsus at 11:30 a.m.

St. Alphonsus also offers an 8:30 a.m. Mass for the Lithuanian community and a 10 a.m. English Mass, both celebrated by Father William Spacek, an archdiocesan priest. Nearly 300 people worship at the shrine every Sunday among the three liturgies.

Since the arrival of the F.S.S.P., daily Masses at the shrine have been offered in the Tridentine rite, at 12:10 p.m. on Monday, Wednesday and Friday and 7 a.m. on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

Father Kiefer, who previously served in Pennsylvania, Georgia, California and Washington State, visits the homes of parishioners throughout the region to give spiritual talks and socialize with small groups. Each Sunday afternoon, the shrine also has a potluck dinner in the courtyard.

“That’s part of our evangelization effort,” he said.

## **Looking to the future**

Bishop Denis J. Madden, urban vicar, said he and the archbishop are excited for the future of the shrine. The fraternity sees St. Alphonsus as a “flagship church,” Bishop Madden said, and it is eager to raise the shrine’s profile nationally.

The bishop said Father Kiefer’s street evangelization fits well with the archdiocesan focus on missionary discipleship. It dovetails with similar evangelization efforts now underway by Father James Boric, rector of the nearby Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Father Kiefer said he anticipates that by next June, an associate pastor from his fraternity will join him. Seminarians from the F.S.S.P. are also likely to be stationed at St. Alphonsus for Christmas, Easter and summer apostolates. They will assist with parish life, Father Kiefer said.

The priest noted that through the leadership of Monsignor Bastress, the old church building has undergone significant structural improvements, including the restoration of its historic stained-glass windows.

Looking to the future, the shrine is now exploring the possibility of restoring the church's interior, improving parking and converting the convent into an overnight retreat center.

"As a shrine, our duty is to share the message of St. Alphonsus," Father Kiefer said. "I think the key to making people aware of the shrine is letting them come here and experience it."

The priest said his fraternity would conduct a national campaign to raise funds to support various projects. He is already receiving financial support from several F.S.S.P. parishes and parishioners to support St. Alphonsus.

Bishop Madden said he hopes the shrine can be seen as a pilgrimage site both locally and nationally. He noted that together with the basilica and the Mother Seton House and St. Mary's Spiritual Center on Paca Street, there is a rich Catholic legacy in the area. St. Jude Shrine is also within walking distance.

In his brief time at St. Alphonsus, Father Kiefer said he has been "awestruck" by the beauty of the church and the dedication of parishioners, many of whom travel for more than an hour to attend Mass there.

"It's a real pleasure and a real joy to be able to offer Mass in such a historic, beautiful church," said Father Kiefer, a former Army captain who was deployed to Mogadishu in Somalia and Port-Au-Prince, Haiti.

Helping the archdiocese grow stronger and holier is at the heart of his mission as an F.S.S.P. priest.

“We are servants of the Lord and his bishops,” Father Kiefer said.

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