

LIVING AS A FAITHFUL SERVANT

Reflections from Father Jim Presta

When I received the letter Fr. Kartje that I was nominated for the 2019 Cardinal Bernardin Catholic Humanitarian Award, I was both surprised and humbled to receive such a noble recognition from Mundelein Seminary. I also thought to myself, "This award is given at the Golf Outing Dinner and I don't golf!" The award, however, is given in memory of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin who ordained me a priest and



appointed me to be the Rector-President of St. Joseph College Seminary. I am honored to accept this award because it treasures the memory of a great Chicago Archbishop for whom I have deep respect and admiration. He is also the only Italian-American to become Archbishop of Chicago, a source of pride for me as the son of Italian immigrants.

I was born and raised in Chicago. My parents were originally from Calabria, the southern region of Italy. I am the youngest of five children. My father was a tailor and my mother worked with him side by side for over thirty years in their own Cleaner-Tailor shop on the southwest side of Chicago.



I am a product of the Catholic school system in Chicago. I am a proud graduate of both Our Lady of the Snows School in Chicago and St. Laurence High School in Oak Lawn. Immediately after high school, I decided to enroll at Niles College Seminary and spent four wonderful years there. Many of my good friends in life were members of my Niles class. I did a lot of "growing up" at Niles. In 1982, I entered Mundelein Seminary, the same year that Cardinal Bernardin arrived in Chicago. In 1985, I was ordained a deacon in the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception at Mundelein. I was ordained a priest on May 24, 1986 at Holy Name Cathedral in Chicago. I was ordained both a deacon and a priest by His Eminence, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin.

My first assignment was St. Christopher Parish in Midlothian where I spent my first seven years as a priest. They often say that your first parish is your first love. That is very true in my case. The people of St. Chris have taught me how to be a priest. I consider the parish my home away from home. I am forever grateful to the Lord for the many people I met during my years there who have become like family for me.



RECIPIENT OF THE 2019 *IN SERVICE OF ONE ANOTHER* AWARD

My second assignment as a priest was Queen of Martyrs Parish in Evergreen Park. I served there for three years as the associate pastor with some of the most fun loving and generous people I have ever met in my life.

One of the biggest surprises in my priestly life came in 1996 when I received a phone call from Cardinal Bernardin's office. The Cardinal asked me to be the new Rector-President of St. Joseph College seminary. The undergraduate seminary program had moved its location from Niles, Illinois to Loyola's Lake Shore Campus. I told the Cardinal that I was surprised that he would ask me to be Rector. I said, "I thought you were going to name me a Pastor." His response was, "I am appointing you a pastor, the pastor of St. Joseph College Seminary.

I was hesitant about the appointment and asked the Cardinal if I could pray about it. He said yes. "You have a day or two to think it over." On the day I met with the Cardinal, I decided to visit my mother. My father had died two months previous to my appointment as Rector. I told my mother that I was not sure I should take the position that the Cardinal offered me. Before my father died, my mom shared with me that my papa predicted that I would be going to work in the seminary. Was this a sign from heaven? I called Cardinal Bernardin the next morning and told him I would accept the position of Rector. He was delighted with my decision. I wasn't sure, though, that I was.



I spent fourteen years (1996-2010) as Rector of St. Joseph College Seminary. They were intense and challenging years for me. One priest told me that, as Rector, I had one of the most difficult jobs in the Archdiocese. Some days, I believed that to be true. Yet, those years at the college seminary helped me to pass on to the next generation what I learned about being a priest from my first two parishes. I met some very fine, gifted and generous young men who passed through the hallowed halls of the college seminary. Some of them are priests today, doing great work in the Church. Others decided to marry and have a family. I was blessed to pray, educate and work with these men at a significant moment in their lives as they decided the vocation to which God was calling them. I also enjoyed the many priests, staff people and Board members who worked at St. Joseph's. They remain my good and loyal friends to this day.

During my years at St. Joseph's, I enjoyed working closely with the National Association of College Seminaries and was elected to be on their Advisory Board. I also worked on a doctoral degree in Mariology. I have had a lifelong devotion to the Blessed Mother. I completed my doctoral work at the



RECIPIENT OF THE 2019 *IN SERVICE OF ONE ANOTHER* AWARD

Marian Library of the University of Dayton, which is the American branch of the Pontifical University “Marianum” in Rome.

In 2010, after an incredible sabbatical that took me to Australia and to visit family back in Italy, I was called to take on a new challenge at Mundelein Seminary. My six years on the faculty at Mundelein Seminary allowed me to wear many hats. I taught courses on the Documents of Vatican II and the Catechism of the Catholic Church to the men in Pre-Theology. I also taught Ecclesiology and Mariology as well as a course I developed on Priesthood for the seminarians in the Master of Divinity program. I was honored to be a member of the Pontifical Faculty and sat on various licentiate and doctoral boards. I was a Cam (Dorm) priest and resided with the students. I was the Director of Pre-Theology and treasured my time with the men who were beginning their time in the seminary. I was also Vice-Rector and Dean of Admissions. I worked under three Rectors: Msgr. Dennis Lyle, Bishop Robert Barron and Fr. John Kartje. I was a formation director and a spiritual director. My years at Mundelein Seminary gave me hope as I helped in some small way to shape future priests for ministry in the Church of the 21st century.

In March 2016, Cardinal Cupich appointed me to be the new pastor of St. Emily Parish in Mt. Prospect. While it was sad to leave seminary work after twenty years, I also saw it as a providential moment to get back to full-time parochial ministry and becoming a pastor for the first time.



St. Emily Parish is nearly 60 years old. It is a diverse and active suburban parish with 2,300 families, a parochial school of 280 students and a Religious Education program with nearly 300 children. I have felt welcomed and loved from the first day I arrived at the parish. I enjoy being the pastor of the best parish in the Archdiocese! (I am not biased at all!)

In these past 33 years since my priestly ordination, I have served in many roles within the Archdiocese including Deacon, Associate Pastor, Vice Rector, Rector-President, Pastor, Chair of the Priest Placement Board and member of the Presbyteral Council. I was given a firm foundation in the Catholic Faith by my wonderful parents. I love being Italian and sharing my heritage and culture with others. I have been blessed to have so many great friends in the priesthood and within the parishes where I have served. Despite any crisis or confusion that may exist, I am happy to be a priest of Jesus Christ and to serve in the Chicago Archdiocese.

As I receive this award from Mundelein Seminary, I thank Almighty God for Joseph Cardinal Bernardin who faithfully and diligently served this local Church of Chicago as our Archbishop for fourteen years, who ordained me a priest and trusted me to be a parish priest, as well as a seminary leader and formator. May Cardinal Bernardin's Episcopal Motto, “As one who serves,” be an inspiration to our Mundelein seminarians as they prepare to faithfully minister in the Catholic Church as priests of Jesus Christ.

