

## JUBILEE PRIESTS

# For Father Byrne, sharing joy of priesthood includes walks with dog and radio spots

By Kelly Sankowski  
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**F**ather William Byrne, who is celebrating his 25th anniversary of ordination to the priesthood this year, can frequently be seen talking walks around Our Lady of Mercy Church in Potomac with his dog, Zélie, greeting parishioners and students along the way.

Zélie, named after the mother of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, is Father Byrne's fifth dog, and besides providing him with companionship, his long line of furry friends "have always been evangelization tools," said the priest, who now serves as pastor of Our Lady of Mercy. Since people love to come up to him to pet the dogs, it provides him with an opportunity to speak to them.

Throughout his 25 years as a priest, Father Byrne has also been surrounded by different breeds of people – serving as a parish priest, college chaplain, and archdiocesan administrator.

"When I was asked to do something different, I was eager to give it a try," he said. "Each place presents new opportunities."

Though Father Byrne began to feel called to the priesthood in college, he followed the advice of his mother and got a "real job" before entering seminary, he said. He taught English, religion and Latin at Mater Dei School in Bethesda, where he had attended seventh and eighth grade.

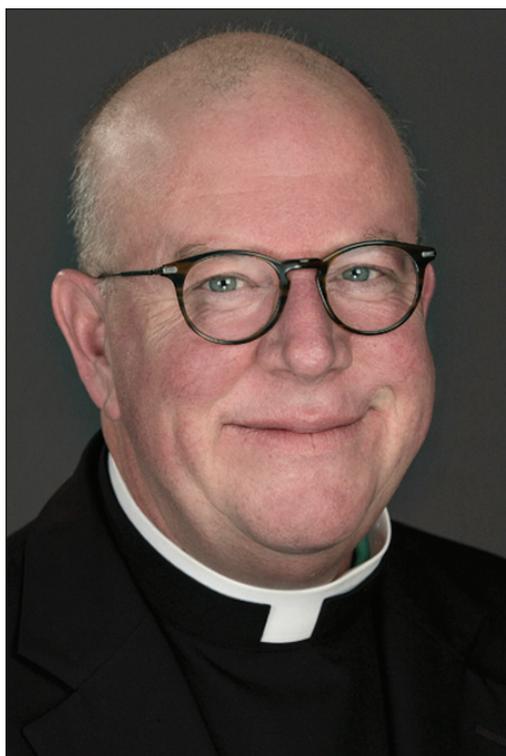
After teaching for a few years, Father Byrne entered the seminary and studied at the North American College in Rome. He earned a license in sacred theology from the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome and was ordained as a priest for the Archdiocese of Washington in 1994.

Father Byrne first served as parochial vicar at the Church of the Little Flower in Bethesda and at the Shrine of St. Jude in Rockville before being appointed as chaplain of the Catholic Student Center at the University of Maryland in 1999.

During his eight years in that role, Father Byrne revived the ministry, instituting several new things that continue to be important there today, including instituting the weekly Wednesday night dinners and inviting FOCUS missionaries to campus. According to Father Rob Walsh, the current chaplain there, Sunday Mass attendance grew from about 150 to about 400-500, and daily Mass attendance grew from a very small number to about 75-100 per day during Father Byrne's tenure.

Since 2003, there has consistently been at least one man in the seminary who had been a student at the University of Maryland during the time that Father Byrne was chaplain, totaling 11 vocations to the priesthood.

When asked what he did to make that change, Father Byrne said he has seen over and over again at his various assignments how things start to change after implementing more frequent Eucharistic



Father William Byrne

Adoration.

"As soon as you put that in the middle, things click into place," he said, adding that he is equally proud of all of the faithful husbands, wives, and religious sisters who began discerning their vocations at the University of Maryland.

"I think Christ is always calling us to his service," he said. "...it is up to the priest to create an environment where people can begin to hear and respond to God's will."

Father Byrne recalled how while he was in seminary at North American College in Rome, Mother Teresa visited and said, "Don't get in God's way," which has stuck with him throughout his 25 years as a priest.

In 2007, he was appointed as the pastor of St. Peter Church on Capitol Hill, where he started a ministry of hosting dinners for members of Congress. Shortly afterward, he was appointed as the Secretary for Pastoral Ministry and Social Concerns for the Archdiocese of Washington in 2009, and filled that role in addition to his duties as pastor. During this experience, he said he "suddenly understood what it was like being a working parent," because he never felt he was doing a good enough job at either role.

Still, Father Byrne said he learned valuable lessons in leadership from Cardinal Donald Wuerl

while working at the archdiocese's pastoral center, which he said, "was a wonderful collaborative opportunity to help create a vision which was based in Christ and the social teachings of the Church."

In 2015, he left both of those roles and was appointed as the pastor of Our Lady of Mercy Parish in Potomac. During his time there, he has instituted additional hours of Confession and Adoration, and began "Mercy U," where lay people can take classes in theology, taught by faculty at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington.

Father Byrne loves "every part" of being a priest, he said, but one part that stands out to him in particular is his love of preaching, which he has done in various different capacities throughout his 25 years as a priest and which he has taught at North American College.

In addition to his Sunday homilies, Father Byrne's voice is frequently heard on the radio throughout the Washington region, as he gives upbeat messages and encouragements as a part of the archdiocese's efforts in the New Evangelization.

Father Byrne has also written an award-winning "5 Things" column for the *Catholic Standard*, which is also featured in short videos on the Archdiocese of Washington's YouTube channel. During the Jubilee Year of Mercy, which ran from Dec. 8, 2015 to Nov. 20, 2016, he was among 700 priests from around the world commissioned by Pope Francis to be a "Missionary of Mercy," asked to preach and teach about God's mercy during the jubilee year.

Father Byrne said preaching is "the premier opportunity to touch people's hearts and to draw them closer to the sacraments, especially the Eucharist."

For about 20 years, Father Byrne has hosted the "seminarian smoker," which he and Msgr. Robert Panke, the rector of the Saint John Paul II Seminary, began to bring together priests and seminarians for a barbeque as "a chance for different generations to get to know each other" and foster "unity in the Presbyterate."

Father Byrne noted his gratitude toward the priests that he has served with, including Msgr. John Enzler and Msgr. Oliver McGready, "for teaching me as a young priest how to love the people," and all of the parochial vicars he has worked with "for the wisdom, insights and freshness they brought."

Through it all, Father Byrne holds that "most important part of a joyful priesthood is fidelity to a Holy Hour," which he said "makes it much easier for you to see where [God] wants you to go."

"If I remember it is Jesus Christ's priesthood and I am being used as His instrument, then it all becomes a joy," he said. "Whether it is the most tragic event or the most great celebration, as long as you remember it is Christ in you, that is where the strength comes from, where the power comes from, and where the joy comes from."