

Father Paul Robinson retires as diocesan judicial vicar

Father Jeff Cabral takes helm this week

By KENNETH J. SOUZA
ANCHOR STAFF

FALL RIVER — When he first came to work at the Tribunal office for the Fall River Diocese in 1992, Father Paul F. Robinson, O.Carm., JCD, said his scope of work was essentially limited to cases involving Marriage annulments.

“It was pretty much almost all Marriages when I started,” Father Robinson told *The Anchor*. “Occasionally you’d have an odd inquiry from the chancery about another matter.”

But over the last 20 years, Father Robinson noted things have changed to the point where “at least half of our time is spent on non-Marriage stuff now,” he said.

“Things like personnel issues and parish restructurings — that’s all been added to our workload and, unfortunately, the staff has decreased while the workload has increased,” he said.

After more than 20 years of service, the 72-year-old Father Robinson will be stepping down as judicial vicar for the Fall River Diocese and head of the diocesan Tribunal office this week.

His assistant and coworker for the past three years, Father Jeffrey Cabral, JCL, will become his successor, effective September 18.

“I’ve really enjoyed the Marriage work,” Father Robinson said. “Recent years have been more difficult because of the other (cases) we’ve had to do. It’s not something I really wanted to get involved with — that’s not where my heart is, I really don’t want to do that stuff.”

“Father Robinson is a very talented canonist and I think I’m going to have to fill some big shoes,” Father Cabral told *The Anchor*. “It’s going to be hard because I always depended on his advice and expertise and now he won’t be in the next office where I can ask him questions.”

Father Robinson fondly recalled the simpler times when he first began working at the Tribunal office alongside Father Jay Maddock and Msgr. Henry Munroe. Back then, the Tribunal staff was also complemented with “four or five guys with canon law degrees who came in at least one day a week to help out,” he said.

“Over the years, all of them have become pastors and have taken on additional duties; so basically the Tribunal now is just myself and Father Cabral,” Father Robinson said, adding that they also have a clerical staff of three to assist them.

Noting that the Tribunal is tech-

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Father Richard D. Wilson, pastor of St. Vincent de Paul Parish in Attleboro, said prayers and words of encouragement for teams of faithful who went door-to-door to reach out to their neighbors in the first-ever Day of Evangelization held recently. After receiving instructions and kits containing materials to distribute, 142 evangelists visited more than 1,000 homes in less than three hours.

Attleboro parish will ‘never be the same’ after Day of Evangelization

By DAVE JOLIVET
ANCHOR EDITOR

ATTLEBORO — The faithful from St. Vincent de Paul Parish in Attleboro prayed, planned and prepared for the first-ever Day of Evangelization by a parish in the Diocese of Fall River, but they didn’t know what to expect when the day finally arrived. The plan was for pairs of volunteer evangelists to visit area homes to share with their neighbors packets of information on the Catholic Church and an invitation to come back to, or get to know Christ in a parish environment for the first time.

Everyone involved put the day in “God’s hands,” and allowed the Holy Spirit to guide them and those on whom the pairs of evangelists paid a visit,” John Rae-Kelly, one of the DOE committee members told *The Anchor*. “The numbers were staggering. The volunteers visited more than 1,000 residences in just two hours.”

“The Day of Evangelization was a very moving experience for everyone involved, from the people who went door to door, to the people who supported them in prayer before the Blessed Sacra-

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Providence College president to offer homily at October diocesan Red Mass

FALL RIVER — Providence College president Dominican Father Brian J. Shanley, O.P., will serve as guest homilist at the annual Fall River Diocese Red Mass, set for Sunday, October 6, at 10 a.m. at St. Mary’s Cathedral in Fall River. Bishop George W. Coleman will be principal celebrant of the Mass.

A long-standing tradition in the Church, the Red Mass is celebrated each year in the diocese to invoke God’s guidance and strength on those who work to promote justice in the legal system.

Judges, attorneys and others working in the justice system throughout Southeastern Massachusetts, Cape Cod and the Islands are invited to attend.

Music at the Mass will be led by the

Stonehill College Choir.

Father Shanley has served as president of Providence College since 2005.

A native of Warwick, R.I., he holds



FATHER BRIAN J. SHANLEY, O.P.

a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Toronto and completed a post doctoral fellowship at the University of Notre Dame’s Center for Philosophy of Religion. After completing undergraduate studies in history at Providence College in 1980, he earned a licentiate degree in philosophy from The Catholic University of America. He also holds a master of divinity and a licentiate degree in sacred theology from the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, D.C.

Ordained a member of the Domini-

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Father Paul F. Robinson, O. Carm., JCD, standing, judicial vicar for the Fall River Diocese, reviews a case with Father Jeffrey Cabral, JCL. Father Robinson will be retiring this week after working at the diocesan Tribunal since 1992 and Father Cabral will be succeeding him, effective September 18. (Photo by Kenneth J. Souza)

Father Paul Robinson to retire from diocesan Tribunal

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nically “the court of the diocese,” Father Robinson said its primary function is to serve as a judiciary body for the bishop in matters of canon law.

“The bishop has several functions, one of which is judiciary,” he said. “But, generally speaking, bishops do not exercise their judicial powers themselves, only because whenever you make a decision, there’s always going to be someone angry about it. So when things come down to trials, they come to the Tribunal.”

According to Father Cabral, many larger dioceses and archdioceses have either a canonical adviser or canonical affairs office to deal with non-Marriage cases.

“In that case, the Tribunal would handle strictly Marriage issues and canonical affairs would handle everything else,” Father Cabral said. “In a sense, here we’re serving both functions.”

In an office that deals with an estimated 200 cases in a given year, Father Robinson said it can take anywhere from a few months to several years to render a decision.

“It’s hard to guess, because there are a lot of steps in between getting a case and ending a case,” he said. “You have no control over the time — you’re very much at the mercy of people responding to mail and stuff like that. Sometimes it zips right along and you get a case done in six months and other times it takes three or four years before you can get everything in order.”

An Easthampton native who first came to work for the Fall River Diocese in December 1992, Father Robinson was ordained a Carmelite priest in New Jersey in 1967 and holds a doctorate in canon law from the University of St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome.

He has served as judicial vicar since July 1, 2002.

“I spent some time (working) in parishes before I got involved with canonical work,” Father Robinson said, adding that he previously taught high school in Louisville, Ky., and spent time in Joliet, Ill., Tuscon, Ariz., and Stockton, Calif. before going to study in Rome for his doctorate.

“I was always interested in canonical law,” he said. “One of the pastors I was working with happened to be a judicial vicar in California and one thing led to another.”

A New Bedford native, the 40-year-old Father Cabral was ordained a priest on June 8, 2002 by then-Bishop Sean P. O’Malley, OFM, Cap. A graduate of Dartmouth Middle School and Dartmouth High School, he received a degree in mathematics from UMass Dartmouth in 1995.

In August 2007, Bishop George W. Coleman assigned Father Cabral to begin canon law studies at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., where he earned a JCL — licentiate in canon law.

As a math major, Father Cabral said there was something about the order and

logic involved in canon law that appealed to him.

“As part of your formation in becoming a priest, you take the basic courses in canon law,” he said. “But I guess I first saw the practical uses of canon law as a priest while I served at St. Anthony’s Parish in Taunton.”

When the bishop approached him about considering getting a degree in canon law, Father Cabral said he began to “appreciate it a little more.”

Although the work of the Tribunal is akin to a courtroom proceeding, Father Robinson said there are key differences between civil and canon law.

“They are technically two different forums,” he said. “Our civil law is built on the British system, but canon law is built on Roman law. In civil law, it’s the judge who collects information and proof; but here it’s the advocates — or attorneys — who do it while the judge just sits here and listens to them and makes a decision. In the Roman system it’s the judge who is responsible to make sure all the bases are covered. But the advocates here are similar to a civil attorney — they, for the most part, interpret and argue the case (for either side). Then the judge has to referee the whole thing.”

Decisions, for the most part, are rendered by a panel of three judges each with canonical law degrees — although in North America a provision has been made to allow just one judge to make

the decision, Father Robinson said.

“There aren’t enough judges to go around, but the norm is three,” he said.

As for declaring a Marriage null, Father Robinson said the common misperception is that the decision is like getting a “Church divorce.”

“The determinations made in a civil court usually entail the division of property, who gets the kids and visitation rights — there’s all kinds of stuff that we don’t get involved with. That’s not our business,” he said. “We don’t change the status of a Marriage. It either is or isn’t valid. We have to determine whether or not it was valid from the get-go.”

Much of the work that goes on in the Tribunal office entails contacting various witnesses to a given Marriage to collect information that would prove the invalidity of that initial bond.

“Most of the time a wedding takes place inside a church full of people and most of the people are sitting there looking at the couple and the common assumption is when they say ‘I do’ they are married,” Father Robinson said. “Well someone comes along 20 years later and alleges the Marriage never took place ... now we’ve got to prove it. You try to figure out if it’s possible that when they said ‘I do’ nothing really happened.”

Father Robinson said the closest analogy in civil law would be a clear-cut case of someone guilty of a crime in a case that lacks the proper evidence for a conviction.

“You have cases where everyone says ‘they’re definitely guilty,’ but you can’t prove it,” he said. “It’s the same thing here. You might have a perfectly coherent, logical story. But can you prove it? You can allege something, but you need to have the proof to back it up. What we do here is try to help people collect that proof.”

While he admitted the Marriage work he’s had at the Tribunal over the years has been rewarding, Father Robinson said having to deal with other things such as parish restructurings, penal law and personnel issues hasn’t been easy.

“I’m almost 73 years old, I don’t want to deal with that anymore,” he said. “When we were in school, penal law was a mere footnote. But now it’s

a major issue.”

“I can remember when I took penal law in my studies, the first day the professor told us: ‘When I first started teaching this, I used to tell students you’re never going to use this. But today I can’t say that because you are all going to have to use this type of law now,’” Father Cabral agreed. “It deals with penalties — the classic example is the sexual abuse of minors — but it deals with any type of things considered a crime under canon law and the penalties that are attached to them if, obviously, they are proven.”

Although he’ll be stepping down as judicial vicar and handing the reins of the Fall River Tribunal office over to Father Cabral, Father Robinson said he’s not ready to completely abandon his interest in canon law. He said he plans to remain living in the area for the foreseeable future and will be “doing some Marriage work with a couple of other Tribunals.”

“When you get to be 73 you’re not so interested in taking on the world anymore,” Father Robinson said. “It might just be nice to sit on the back porch on a day like today and read. I’ve already got a pile of stuff waiting for me to get to it.”

As for his successor, Father Robinson said he has no doubt that Father Cabral will do well in the role.

“He’s got the training and the right outlook and attitude,” Father Robinson said. “My only concern is that this has become such a huge job — it’s so diverse now — that it’s almost overwhelming to consider that one person is going to have to deal with it all. But I think Father Cabral is going to do a fine job. He’s got everything going for him.”

Admitting he’s getting “a little anxious and nervous” as September 18 approaches, Father Cabral nevertheless is looking forward to the challenge.

“It’s a great responsibility to deal with these issues as the canonical expert not only for the bishop but also for the priests of the diocese as well,” Father Cabral said. “I’ll probably be dependent on the experience of other canonists and the secretaries here to guide me along in my first few days, weeks and months ... and I’ll be relying on the prayers of people to help me along, too.”

This week in

50 years ago — The Serra District 40 Convention was held beginning with a Mass for Serrans and their wives in the chapel of Bishop Stang High School in North Dartmouth. Serra Club members from New Bedford, Fall River, Attleboro, and Providence, R.I. were in attendance.

25 years ago — People in the north end of New Bedford got an eyeful when the former St. Mary’s rectory was moved some three miles by its purchaser. A new rectory had been completed and a new church was ready for use.

diocesan history

10 years ago — More than 1,500 people gathered at Corpus Christi Parish in East Sandwich for the blessing and dedication of the new church. The new house of worship was dedicated by Bishop George W. Coleman, who previously served as pastor at Corpus Christi Parish from 1985 to 1994.

One year ago — A Mass and ribbon-cutting ceremony were held at St. John the Evangelist School in Attleboro to bless and dedicate a new \$1 million addition encompassing three new classrooms, a new welcome center and reception area, new office space, and updated media center.