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Priesthood bonds archbishop and cousin in life-changing way



Bishop Charles C. Thompson, left, and his cousin, Father Dale Cieslik, right, pose after concelebrating the wedding Mass of their cousin Millie Cambron and her husband Joe Paul Brady on July 16, 2016, at St. Catherine Church in New Haven, Ky. (Photo courtesy Bob Knoll)

By John Shaughnessy

When he saw the photos of his cousin being greeted with a warm smile by Pope Francis, Father Dale Cieslik just shook his head in joy and wonder.

“Just to see him with the pope—oh my!—that’s a Thompson there!” recalls Father Cieslik, the first cousin of Archbishop Charles C. Thompson.

As the two cousins were growing up in the rural, hilly country known as “the Kentucky Holy Land” because of its strong Catholic roots, the thought that a member of their extended family would one day become an archbishop and be welcomed by a pope seemed beyond the realm of consideration.

And yet that’s what happened on June 29 in St. Peter’s Square at the Vatican when Pope Francis gave Archbishop Thompson a pallium—a woolen band worn over the shoulders that symbolizes his new, closer connection with the pope and his responsibility as the shepherd who will lead the Church in central and southern Indiana.

Seeing the photos of that exchange was a moment of pride and emotion for Father Cieslik—the person that Archbishop Thompson credits with making him realize that he could pursue a vocation as a priest.

“He planted a seed when he went away to seminary,” Archbishop Thompson says about his older cousin. “Before then, I thought the priesthood was for other people, other families. That said to me that the Holy Spirit can call any of us. So he was a good example.”

It was a way of life the future archbishop would first consider seriously when he faced a difficult time as a youth—when he attended high school during a period of desegregation.

A defining moment

"We moved to Louisville just a year or two before busing," Archbishop Thompson recalls. "The very first year of busing, I was bused as a freshman downtown to one of the two schools that were considered the worst in the whole educational system at that time in Louisville, if not Kentucky.

"A lot of violence that year. Just to give you a couple examples, but not to get too graphic, there was a stabbing once. A teacher disciplined a student and the next day all four tires were slit. There was a rape on one floor. There were drug dealings. It was the first time I thought of priesthood in a whole different light.

"I remember asking myself, 'All this violence and all this inhumanity to humanity, how does my life speak to this behavior, to this kind of violence?' That's when priesthood came to me in a whole different light. I went on and dated through high school and college. But halfway through college, that's when I went to my cousin [Father Cieslik] about the seminary. It triggered that whole notion of a witness—how does my life speak to something other than that violence?"

Father Cieslik remembers that visit. At the time, he just didn't realize it would become a defining moment in his cousin's life.

"I tried to show him the way of life as a seminarian, and I introduced him to some of my friends," says Father Cieslik, who entered Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology in St. Meinrad in 1974.

"For me, it really is humbling to know that was a defining moment for him. We never know how what we say or do affects people. It was me just being myself. In the priesthood, we want to serve."

A brotherly bond

Father Cieslik was ordained a priest for the Archdiocese of Louisville in 1982. A year later, the future archbishop of Indianapolis followed a similar path after graduating from Bellarmine University in Louisville in 1983 with a degree in accounting. He entered Saint Meinrad that fall and was ordained a priest in the Louisville archdiocese in 1987.

It's a connection that has continued, a connection that has bonded the cousins in a special way

"We are companions in the journey," Father Cieslik says. "He and I are related on the Thompson side of the family. And we share our ordained ministry. There's a brotherly bond between the two of us. It was really significant for us to be priests in the same archdiocese, to serve in the same local Church. We shared good conversations about what was going on in our archdiocese, in our parishes."

They were even pastors of neighboring parishes in the Louisville area for a while—another element of the closeness that provides Father Cieslik with a special insight about his cousin.

“His biggest gift is being a person of prayer,” Father Cieslik says. “He’s going to use that prayer to help him make decisions on behalf of the people of the archdiocese. He’s also a great listener. He listens to how things will affect people.

“Another big plus is he knows Church law so well, and he knows how Church law is helpful serving people. His degree in accounting from Bellarmine is helpful, too. He understands money, and he’s very frugal.”

‘We feel stronger as a family’

Their closeness continued during the six years Archbishop Thompson served as the bishop of the Evansville, Ind., Diocese.

“I’ve gone to Evansville quite often to be with him, to have a meal,” says Father Cieslik, the archivist for the Louisville Archdiocese and the pastor of St. Francis Xavier Parish in Mount Washington, Ky. “First of all, it’s just catching up on our family, and seeing what each of us has been up to. I don’t hesitate to ever ask him his opinion. He has very good insights.”

Father Cieslik arranged his schedule to arrive in Indianapolis a few days before his cousin became the new archbishop during the installation Mass at SS. Peter and Paul Cathedral on July 28. As the archbishop moved into his new residence, his cousin wanted to be there to “help him unpack and hang a few pictures.”

He also wanted to be part of the cookout that Archbishop Thompson hosted for his extended family on July 27. That get-together reminds Father Cieslik of the family meals they were both part of growing up.

“Our grandmother, Mildred Thompson, became a widow very young,” Father Cieslik says. “A lot of us kids would get farmed out to work in her garden during the summer, picking vegetables and wild blackberries. During the week, there were three or four cousins staying there, and it really built the bond between us. On Sundays, all the uncles and aunts came home to our grandmother’s house. Everyone would bring something to eat. It was like a family reunion every Sunday.”

He expects a large family reunion for the archbishop’s installation Mass.

“It speaks of closeness and support—and being very proud of Chuck. We love him a lot.

“Chuck and I presided at a wedding in the family a year ago. We’ve done that quite a bit. It’s so wonderful. When he and I are together, I just feel a lot of connection. I feel the presence of grandparents and aunts and uncles who are no longer with us. We miss them a lot. When we are together, we feel stronger as a family.” †