

Badge and a gun traded for a crucifix

New priest spent 25 years in law enforcement

By GARY SOULSMAN, The News Journal (Delaware), Posted Saturday, July 16, 2011



New York City police officer Anthony Cardone (center) was new to Brooklyn Precinct 63 in 1984.
COURTESY PHOTOS



Anthony F. Cardone, 58, was ordained a Catholic priest last month.

Newly ordained Catholic priest Anthony F. Cardone comes to the job with plenty of experience in the study of diplomacy, security and sin.

A former law enforcement officer who handled all three, he's also known the emotional upheaval of divorce and is thrilled to be stationed near the ocean so he can indulge his passion for surfing.

Not your average 20-something novice.

Cardone was one of three men ordained by Bishop Francis Malooly last month at the Cathedral of Saint Peter, in Wilmington. At 58, he was by far the oldest to take his vows this year in the Diocese of Wilmington. (The two other new priests, the Rev. Joseph W. McQuaide IV of Elkton, Md., and the Rev. John T. Solomon of Wilmington are both 25.)

In his first career -- 25 years in law enforcement -- he went undercover to buy handguns and confiscate counterfeit money for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.

As a special agent with the State Department, he made sure diplomacy at home and abroad was conducted safely, coming into contact with a wide range of political and religious figures, including

the Dalai Lama, Pope John Paul II, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, President Bill Clinton and Yasser Arafat, the late Palestinian leader.

Earlier, as a New York City police officer, Treasury officer and a Nassau County probation officer, Cardone dealt with murderers, thieves and liars. He was well aware that these folks needed to be arrested. At the same time he's often felt criminals could use his compassion, and he's found himself praying for those he booked.

"If you have the right attitude, you'll do your job but do it in a loving way," he says.

Steve Liantonio, one of his first partners on the New York City police force, says, "He's a person that cares out of his heart and takes an interest in you."

More than half of the 275 priests joining American dioceses this year are between 25 and 34, according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University.

Several years ago Father Joseph Cocucci, director of vocations for the Diocese of Wilmington, met Cardone, who was then in his early 50s, and was impressed with his faith. As a policy, the diocese considers candidates 18 to 50, but then Bishop Michael Saltarelli had encouraged Cocucci to use his discretion when older men applied.

"I felt Anthony had a great sincerity and enough things had happened in his life that it seemed to me that the priesthood is where he was being led," Cocucci says.

He also fit another trend: men coming to the priesthood as a second career. Since 1964, Blessed John XXIII National Seminary, near Boston, has trained such men and there are 600 alumni serving. A few are now bishops. Cocucci attended the seminary, as did Cardone, who found an interesting mix of students. Cardone studied with a former microbiologist, eye doctor, anesthesiologist, federal judge, airline pilot, rocket scientist, veterinarian and military officers.

"That our church needs people of any age is undeniable," says Father Allan Fitzgerald, director of Villanova University's Augustinian Institute.

Older priests bring a life experience that is valuable to parishes, though some may resist being molded to seminary theology, Fitzgerald says. Still age is seldom an impediment to acceptance, given that the average age of the 27,000 diocesan priests is 60, according to CARA.

The path to the priesthood wasn't clear to Cardone, who is now serving St. Luke-St. Andrew Churches in Ocean City, Md. At age 9, Cardone was an altar boy. He also attended Catholic schools and always found mystery and beauty in the Mass.

He says if he'd had more courage as a young man he might have entered the priesthood in his 20s, but he did have the courage to face criminals and guns.

He's had numerous secular jobs, managing buildings and serving as a flight attendant. He also married and has a daughter, Kate, who is 24. However, his marriage was not a sacramental one in the eyes of the church and it was annulled in the 1990s. Today he is in the rare position for a priest of having lived through the grief of divorce.

"I know life is painful and people suffer and there's human weakness," he says. "But Jesus wants people to trust in God and seek forgiveness. With God's mercy all things are possible." His divorce was one of the most difficult periods of his life and he found "Divine Mercy in My Soul," a

book by Saint Maria Faustian Kowalska, a comfort. "Through the diary you can see God relating with love to his creation," he says.

Liantonio, his former partner, says Cardone is much the same as when he was as a New York cop. Even then he had a knack for getting things done peacefully. "I used to joke that he was connected," Liantonio says. "It was amazing how things just happened for him."

Cardone says he often saw people's longing to be better people when they sinned. That's why, while serving in diplomatic security, he once gave a holy medal blessed by Pope John Paul II to a war criminal. "This man, who had murdered many, welled up with tears," Cardone says.

Often, Cardone has felt God's response to his spiritual needs. In the 1990s on assignment in Beirut, he was confined to a compound, unable to leave for Mass. "I went to my supervisor and he said it was too dangerous to leave and go to church," says Cardone.

Still, he longed for Communion, and from the compound he could see a statue of the Holy Mother. In prayer he cried out for her intercession, and one day a Capuchin priest from Nazareth, home of the Holy Mother, came looking for Cardone. The priest began to hold Mass on a regular basis.

Cardone is grateful to Mary. Prior to becoming a priest, he thought he would have to give up three favorite hobbies -- fishing, boating and surfing. But he was wrong. He now finds himself in a parish on the Atlantic coast where there is plenty of fishing, boating and surfing.

"Sometimes I feel like a spoiled child of the Blessed Mother," he says.

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Special agent Cardone met Pope John Paul II at the Vatican in 1988.



As a State Department special agent, Cardone also met President Clinton.



Cardone was stationed in Beirut in 1993.



Special agent Cardone with Nelson Mandela at Kennedy Airport, in New York, in 1990.