

A Closer Look – An interview with Bishop Malone’s right hand man

Who is the young priest seen so often with Bishop Malone; the man with the shock of dark hair and the distinctive and easy laugh? Where did he come from and what makes him tick?

What is your official title? I am Ryszard Biernat, the Secretary to the Bishop and Vice Chancellor.

Where did your unusual name come from? I was born in Poland, Ryszard is Polish for Richard.

Tell me more about your family. I have 5 brothers and 3 sisters; I am the 8th child in my family. There are 17 years between my oldest and youngest siblings. I have 24 nieces and nephews and my entire family still lives in Poland. My mom is still with us, but my dad passed away in 2006. Fr. Leon Biernat is my second cousin; his father and my father were brothers.

When did you feel a calling to the priesthood? At age 19, while taking a walk in the woods under a full moon I had a drastic conversion; it was May 23, 1999 at 11:30pm.

Are you kidding me? No, one night, a few weeks before that dramatic night, I went out after work for a beer with a few friends. While walking home that night an older woman called out to me asking if I'd assist her in getting a man in a wheelchair into church. The diocese was having an event for people with disabilities. The woman was to have met someone to help her with the task, but the person was late and the woman didn't want to miss the service. So, I helped her get the wheelchair up the ramp then I decided to stay for the event so I could help her get him back down the ramp when the service was over. During the service the person who was supposed to help her arrived; she was young and very pretty. After the service, she invited me to join her at a discussion group. As I said, she was young and pretty, so I went. It turned out to be a scripture study group for teenagers. The group met every Thursday, there was no moderator, we simply opened the bible, read a passage and discussed its relevance in our lives. Before then, I had not gone to church regularly or had any real religious education.

Then what? After that night in the woods, I woke each morning for the next two weeks with only one thought -I think I will become a priest. I spent the next two years at the Seminary in Poland, then, on the advice of one of my teachers, at the age of 21, I moved to the US where there was a much greater need for priests. I spent 2 years in Michigan at SS. Cyril and Methodius Seminary and finished the last 5 years at Christ the King Seminary. I was ordained by Bishop Kmiec on August 8, 2009.

What are some of the challenges you have had since moving to the US? There are some cultural differences I have had to learn here. One is personal space; in Poland people sit and stand very close to each other. When I got here, and was in a situation where there were two people sitting on a couch, I would go and sit in the middle of them thinking it would be easier for conversation. I didn't realize that I was making people uncomfortable. I learned, after I watched people get up and move to another chair or couch, to give more personal space.

I also had confusion understanding the American rules of hospitality. In Poland, it is normal to have people stop by your home or place of work unannounced; an open door means all are welcome, a closed door means I am busy working. In the seminary I would sometimes be walking past an open door and just walk in and sit down for a visit with someone not knowing they were busy and I was really interrupting them. And when I was busy working and my door was closed, some people mistook it as me being standoffish. I have gotten better at understanding this too.

What do you miss most about Poland? I miss seeing my family; I have not seen them in 3 years. I was not able to travel back to Poland until I got my green card. I got it the other day, want to see it? I also miss the mountains. Note: at the writing of this article, Fr. Ryszard is just back from visiting his family in Poland.

Tell me about your unusual hobby. I have always loved books. In 5th grade, I was helping out at the library putting books away. I came upon a book on beekeeping that had never been taken out. I felt sorry for the book, so I hugged it, checked it out and took it home. When I read it, I was so enthralled that in 6th grade my mother allowed me to buy my first hive and honey bees.

Honey bees in Eastern/Central Europe are a symbol of Christian religion because they work together, sacrifice and their instinct is to protect the hive. Hives are a living organism, with different bees taking the role of collecting water, nectar, pollen, feeding the young and cleaning the hive. They take many roles with one goal –producing something good. When I was the Parochial Vicar at St. Amelia's and anytime I work with children, I teach the kids about the parallels between the hive and the church.

Besides keeping bees and working with kids, what makes you happy? Celebrating the Eucharist behind the altar, I feel as if I belong there. Nowhere else in the world do I feel as comfortable; it's like a puzzle piece that just fits. There is a great affirmation; like drinking satisfies thirst, for me, celebrating the Eucharist affirms my calling. I can't picture myself any happier than I am right now, doing what's right and following the Lord.