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IN PERSON; How Will He Play in Newark?

By MARY ANN CASTRONOVO FUSCO

WEEKS before the installation of John Joseph Myers as the fifth archbishop of Newark last Tuesday, rumors were swirling like the leaves in Branch Brook Park.

Once the surprise wore off that the bishop of the largely rural and homogeneous diocese of Peoria, Ill., had been named to head the predominantly urban and heterogeneous archdiocese of Newark, the questions started flying:

Would the archbishop ban women and girls from the roles they now play in church services?

Would an all-religion format be imposed on the radio station at Seton Hall University, a diocesan institution?

The answer to those questions is no, but many Catholics -- including priests and nuns in the diocese -- are concerned that Archbishop Myers might be too conservative for Newark's 1.3 million Catholics.

"I'm not the ogre that I've been made out to be," said the 60-year-old archbishop in the library of his residence, which is connected to the Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart.

Just six months after assuming the bishopric of Peoria in 1990, he attracted widespread attention with a strongly worded pastoral letter saying, "Let there be no doubt that striving for legal abortion is radically inconsistent with the Catholic Faith."

In 1993, he supported a decision not to renew the contract of Marlynn Kelsch, a part-time high-school religion teacher who allowed her students to debate the ordination of women after the head of her department, a priest, had asked her to cancel the discussion.

As head of the Peoria diocese, Bishop Myers discouraged educators from attending the National Catholic Education Conference in Milwaukee last April because Sister Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun who supports the ordination of women, was a keynote speaker.

"The issue of the ordination of women is a settled question, and Sister Chittister is not accepting that," said the archbishop.

The eagle, symbol of St. John the Evangelist, his patron saint, is emblazoned on the gold ring the archbishop wore during his installation ceremony. And he takes his own evangelical role seriously.

"My area of responsibility is to see that those who are given a bully pulpit by the church present what the church asks to have taught -- and I do it with some enthusiasm," he said.

But he said being called conservative was "unfair."

"I was a student in Rome during the Second Vatican Council," Archbishop Myers said. "I was ordained a priest after the council, so I don't understand the whole matter of liberal and conservative. I don't think anyone should be surprised that a bishop or an archbishop of the church would stand for the catechism and would stand for the church. I don't think that's conservative. I think that's middle of the road. I think that's moderate. I welcome the opportunity to let people know who I really am."

To that end, Archbishop Myers said he planned to spend the next two months meeting lay and religious figures in Bergen, Essex, Hudson and Union Counties, which make Newark the smallest archdiocese in the nation geographically but the seventh-largest in population. It comprises 235 parishes, 174 Catholic elementary and secondary schools, three colleges and Seton Hall University, three seminaries, eight hospitals, and the largest social services agency in the state.

For now, the daily walks he was accustomed to taking as he meditates on his rosary beads have ceased. Strolling through Newark, he has been advised, is not the same as a walk along the streets of Peoria. Nonetheless, he said, "I already consider myself a New Jersey resident."

His quick, unpretentious speech could pass for that of a native New Jerseyan, but he grew up on a small farm on the edge of Earlville, Ill., where his family ran a milk distribution business.

"My mother was a good and holy woman from an Irish Catholic background, so we always said grace before meals and usually grace after meals," Archbishop Myers recalled. "We said the rosary together as a family in the front room after dinner whenever she could come up with a good reason, and any other time she could trick us into it."

His father, Melvin Wayne (Jack) Myers, a Presbyterian, converted to Roman Catholicism when he married. The couple had seven children. The archbishop, the oldest, remains close to his three brothers and three sisters, talking to most of them weekly. Each day he speaks with his 83-year-old father, whose health has been failing since Mrs. Myers died in December.

As a child, the future archbishop shared a passion for science fiction with his best friend, Gary K. Wolf, who went on to create Roger Rabbit. They remain close, and hope to rewrite a favorite sci-fi novel of their youth called "Space Hawk." "We started to do that in the summer, but unfortunately in the last four to six weeks I haven't been able to keep up my end of the bargain," the archbishop said.

His calendar is crammed with such traditional local celebrations as the annual Red Mass for the members of the legal profession on Oct. 21, but also with the unexpected. The annual St. Florian Mass for firefighters, to be held at Sacred Heart today, holds special significance in light of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11. Tomorrow he will offer the funeral Mass at the cathedral basilica for the Port Authority police superintendent, Fred Morrone, and on Nov. 4, a Mass of remembrance for Port Authority of New York and New Jersey police officers.

When he enrolled in Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa, his intention was to study law, not theology. During a retreat in the spring of his freshman year, he decided to switch into the seminary. "I was kind of a hard catch for the Lord. Several times I thought of moving out of the seminary department while I was at college. I wanted a family, I wanted excitement."

Ordained a priest in 1966 in St. Peter's Basilica, he obtained his degree in theology from the Gregorian University in Rome, where all his courses, books and exams were in Latin. Yet, he has never celebrated a Latin Mass. "I wouldn't know how to," he said. "I get along in Italian and Spanish. I'm not a great linguist."

His early assignments included serving as assistant pastor at Holy Family Parish in Peoria and as associate pastor of St. Matthew Parish in Champaign, Ill. In 1977, he received his doctoral degree in canon law from Catholic University of America in Washington. Several administrative positions in the diocese of Peoria followed before his appointment as bishop there in 1990.

Although some have wondered whether the new archbishop would ban women from reading from Scriptures during Mass or dispensing communion or prohibit girls from acting as altar servers, the archbishop said he had no such intentions.

The Catholic church's prohibition on women serving as priests, he believes, is not a denial of power. "I don't think holy orders is necessarily the greatest sacrament of the church," he said. "The catechism of the Catholic church lists marriage and holy orders together as the two sacraments of mission. So it's not a matter of greater than or less than."

While Roman Catholics are obliged to follow the rulings of the church, said Sister Maura Campbell, a Dominican nun and emeritus professor of theology and philosophy at Caldwell College, she did not think the question of women's ordination should be closed.

On the general issue of questioning the faith, Archbishop Myers said: "I think questions should be welcome, because the only way that people will learn is asking questions. Now, there are two ways of asking questions: one is staking out a claim and another is genuinely seeking an answer."

Some Catholic educators say they are concerned about how strictly the archbishop will enforce a papal decree calling for Catholic teachers of Catholic theology in Catholic institutions to receive a mandatum, or permission to teach, from their local bishop. Some fear that teachers' beliefs and personal lives might be examined as part of the hiring process.

"In the diocese of Peoria we had no Catholic colleges or universities, no seminary of our own," the archbishop said. "This is an area where the archbishop intends to be quite active, but also needs a lot of learning. I don't think it is a threat to academic freedom, and my intention is to meet in a dialogical way with officials of the colleges and university and with the appropriate professors to talk it over."

He is at work on a pastoral letter on what it means to be a diocese, which he hopes will be used by priests and school administrators to help them make "decisions about pastoral issues."

"One of the things that I did in my confirmation homilies in Peoria and will find ways to communicate here," he said, "is to ask parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, older brothers and sisters, teachers and anyone who's helping a young person to discern his or her future to keep a church-related vocation as a real option. And then I add a little zinger: 'And if you can't do that, you might ask yourself about your own relationship with the church and pray about it.' I challenge people a little bit."

Photos: John Joseph Myers was installed last week as the Roman Catholic archbishop of Newark at the Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart. Some fear he will be too conservative for the diocese. (Photographs by Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times)