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Bishop's journey

This November will mark the five-year anniversary since Bishop James D. Conley's installation as bishop of the Lincoln Diocese. Throughout his 32-year career in the clergy, he never envisioned himself being a priest in the first place, much less leading one of the most faithful dioceses in the nation.

"First of all, I thought you couldn't become a bishop if you were a convert," Conley said in a phone interview. "I thought you had to be a lifelong Catholic, which is not true, although only two other bishops in the United States are converts."

Conley's grew up in a Presbyterian household in Kansas City, Missouri. However, his unlikely road to bishop started in Lawrence, Kansas, as a student at the University of Kansas. During his first few semesters, he took part in a humanities program where students studied classical works from authors like Homer and Plato.

"The idea of the program was to create a college within a college," Conley said. "A community of students that were on the quest, a common quest."

Before going to college, Conley wasn't as religious and even described himself as a nominal Christian. It wasn't until his third semester into the program that he was introduced to Christian literature and Christianity as a whole.

"Reading these great books, I began to think more and more about truth and about goodness and beauty, and is there a God, and heaven and hell, and all these big questions, which are raised in these great works of literature," Conley said.

After the humanities program ended after his sophomore year, he began church hopping in order to find the right fit. Many of his classmates and friends from the humanities program were Catholic, and that prompted him to sign up for classes at the local parish.

About halfway through the course, Conley found his home.

“Everything made sense to me,” Conley said.

At the end of his junior year, he was initiated in the Catholic Church and unknowingly started a path toward the priesthood. Conley graduated college with a degree in literature and after a lot prayer and reflection during those immediate post-college years; he answered the call to the priesthood in 1985. From there his road to Lincoln made stops in Wichita, Kansas, Denver, and even Rome where he worked closely with then-Pope John Paul II.

“Having had that experience in seeing the Church at the heart, and being so close especially to St. John Paul II who was my boss during most of my years in Rome, and now he’s a canonized saint. So that probably had the biggest influence on me,” Conley said.

Once he was named bishop of the Lincoln diocese in 2012, Conley hit the ground running by making an immediate impact. Msgr. Robert Tucker, who worked with the bishop while he was at Cathedral of the Risen Christ before moving to Seward last year, said in a phone interview that the bishop has a tremendous way of connecting with young people.

“People just flock, young people flock,” Tucker said. “Part of it is he’s got a lot of interest that are similar to young people. He doesn’t hesitate to tell you he’s a big KU fan.”

Father Steven Mills, assistant chaplain the St. Thomas Aquinas Newman Center, notes that aside from his sports interest and similar hobbies, Conley’s ability to connect to young people, especially college students, has much to do with empathy.

“He understands the search that goes on in college. The questions that are trying to be answered at the depths of ‘who am I,’ ‘what is the purpose of this life,’ ” Mills said.

Mills added that Conley speaks a lot about the heart, stemming from the Latin motto he chose, “cor ad cor loquitur,” or “heart speaks to heart.”

“That’s why he speaks so much about the heart because when the heart longs for something, we often just fill it with whatever’s most convenient,” Mills said. “But if we let it actually sit there and rest and we keep longing for it and keep seeking for what’s going to satisfy it that’s when we’re going to find our Lord.”

While the bishop has had success connecting with the community, he has faced challenges through his administrative duties as bishop, especially when it came to dealing with the diocese’s financials.

“He’s had to figure out what the financial situation is in the diocese, and had to cut back on some of the things that the diocese wanted to do just because of lack of funds for these things,” Tucker said. “Yet he responded in a great way. He conducted a capital campaign across the diocese of Lincoln and raised \$54 million dollars.”

However, even when he had to deal with those challenges, the bishop still made time to others. J.D. Flynn, the bishop’s former communications director and good friend, recalls how Conley comforted him and family in their darkest time.

“Our daughter has had leukemia, so shortly after we moved to Lincoln she spent almost a full year in the hospital,” Flynn said. “And Bishop Conley would come to Omaha, would come with regularity to bring communion to my wife who was with our daughter in the hospital, and just to sit and listen. So that kind of pastoral kindness really stood out to me.”

Conley looks to continue to grow the Lincoln diocese as he sets his sight on another five or so years as bishop. His goals include strengthening the area's Catholic school system, making Catholic education more affordable and accessible, encourage young men and women to consider the religious life, and by using his platform as a convert himself to reach out to those falling away from the faith or reaching out to those who don't have any faith at all.

"No matter what you're struggling with, we're all broken, we're all suffering from the imperfect world in which we live, but we all have great capacity for more, or made for more," Conley said.