



# ARCHDIOCESE OF DENVER

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## **Bishop-elect is convert to Catholicism, has ties to Denver A Q&A with Bishop-elect James D. Conley**

The *Denver Catholic Register* conducted an e-mail interview with Bishop-elect James D. Conley last week. In it, he reflects on his childhood, his conversion to the Catholic faith, and his ministry.

By Roxanne King

**Q: How did you learn you had been named auxiliary bishop of Denver and what was your reaction?**

**A:** On Tuesday of Holy Week, in the afternoon, I was in the parish offices at Blessed Sacrament in Wichita, and my secretary told me that a monsignor with an Italian accent was on the line. I had just returned from the Chrism Mass at the Cathedral and was getting ready for another round of confessions at the church. I took the call in my office and it was the apostolic nuncio from Washington, D.C., Archbishop Pietro Sambi. After a bit of small talk, he cut right to the chase and informed me that the Holy Father had called me to the office of bishop and appointed me auxiliary of Denver.

I really didn't know what to say at first. I was both humbled and overwhelmed. I asked him if he could repeat what he had just said since it happened so quickly. He repeated his words and I asked him if he was sure he had the right person. The nuncio then said he was quite certain that he had the right person and would I accept the appointment.

With all the activities of Holy Week foremost on my mind, I asked the nuncio if I could at least take this to prayer and let him know in the morning. He said that this would be OK but to remember that the Holy Father had already made his decision. Blessed Sacrament was the first parish in our diocese to institute Perpetual Eucharistic Adoration (1983), so I immediately went to our adoration chapel to pray for God's strength and light. I went to bed that night and woke up the next morning with a sense of peace. I knew that this was God's will for me. I called the nuncio and told him that I accepted the appointment. It was March 19, my 53<sup>rd</sup> birthday.

**Q: You spent some of your early childhood in the Denver-metropolitan area. Do you have any special memories from that time?**

**A:** We moved to Denver from the Kansas City-metropolitan area in 1957 when I was 2 years old and we returned in 1963 when I was 8 years old and halfway through my third-grade year. Even though I was very young, there are three special memories that stick out in my mind from our years in Denver. I remember vividly the beauty of the mountains and learning to ski from my dad, who was an avid skier. I also remember starting kindergarten and attending grade school at Hoskinson Cottage School in Arvada. We lived on Flower Street and the school was at the top of our block. I would walk to school every day. Back then, there were fields behind the school and I remember riding our bikes in those fields. Thirdly, I remember when my sister was born in May of 1962. My parents couldn't have any more children after they had me and so we adopted my sister when she was 6 weeks old. I was 7 years old at the time and I remember going to the adoption agency with my parents to pick up my new baby sister.

**Q: Have you been to Colorado since leaving here at age 8?**

**A:** After we moved back to the Kansas City area, we would often return to Colorado for family vacations, particularly for ski trips. My aunt, my mother's only sister, lived in Denver at the time and we would visit her and my cousin, who still lives in Denver. Over the years I continued to return to Colorado for ski trips in the winter. When I returned from Rome in 2006 and was appointed pastor of Blessed Sacrament I discovered, to my delight, that each February our parish sponsored a parish family ski trip to Colorado. I have been privileged to go on two of these trips and this past February we took two full bus loads of families to Copper Mountain. I celebrated Mass every day for our group.

**Q: Tell us about your family.**

**A:** My parents are Carl and Betty Conley. My father passed away in November of 2006 at the age of 81 after a long struggle with rheumatoid arthritis. They were happily married for 59 years. My mother, Betty, still lives in Overland Park, Kan., a suburb of Kansas City. On March 23, Easter Sunday, she celebrated her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. My sister Susan and her husband Daniel, live in Olathe, Kan., (another suburb of K.C.) and they have two children, Kyle who is 21 and a junior at Kansas State University, and Kaitlyn who is 15 and a freshman in high school.

**Q: You are a convert to the Catholic faith. What impelled your decision to become Catholic?**

**A:** I converted to the Catholic faith in 1975 when I was 20 years old and a junior at University of Kansas, a college known more for its basketball than for its Christianity! However, in the 1970s there was a wonderful two-year Great Books program for freshmen and sophomores at K.U. called the Integrated Humanities Program. I enrolled in the program as a freshman and over the two years we read the classical works from Greek and Roman culture, as well as the medieval and modern authors. The program was team-taught by three very gifted professors. What was unique about the IHP was the fact that the professors took the poetic approach to education. The motto of the program was "*Nascantur in admiratione*," which means, "Let them be born in wonder." They wanted the student to be alive to intelligence, and the beginning of such a life is wonder.

What the program did was to introduce me to goodness, truth and beauty for the first time— through literature, poetry, music, the classical authors—and it was presented in such a way that if you had an open heart, you couldn't help falling in love. And that's what I did, basically, I fell in love. And as I pursued this love, it led me into the Roman Catholic Church, which is where I found the fulfillment of truth, goodness and beauty.

**Q: What led you to enter the priesthood?**

**A:** After I graduated from K.U. in 1977, I worked construction in Kansas City for about six months and saved up enough money to travel to Europe. Some friends of mine, who were also students of the IHP, discovered a Benedictine Abbey in France where Latin and Gregorian chant were still very much alive and so a group of us ended up staying there during that spring and summer. While I did seriously consider a vocation to the monastic life, I felt that God was calling me back to Kansas to get married and raise a family.

A friend of mine had just inherited his grandmother's farm in North Central Kansas and invited me to come to work with him, so I returned to Kansas in the fall of 1978. I had come to appreciate the Benedictine ideal of prayer and work, so I really enjoyed the rhythm of the rural life. I met a very good Catholic girl and things seemed to be falling into place.

After about a year, in October of 1979, the then new pope, John Paul II, came to the United States and so a group of us traveled to the Mass in Des Moines, Iowa. It was Oct. 4, the feast of Saint Francis of Assisi, a beautiful autumn day, during harvest season. It was during that Mass with the Holy Father, surrounded by hundreds of bishops and priests from all across the Midwest, and some 300,000 fellow Catholics, I thought for the first time that maybe God was calling me to be a diocesan priest. I went to visit a priest in Wichita, where my girlfriend lived, and within three months I was enrolled in the seminary.

**Q: What do you like most about being a priest?**

**A:** For me, celebrating the sacraments is my greatest joy, particularly offering holy Mass and hearing confessions. To be able to bring the love and mercy of Christ to the world through the sacraments is the greatest privilege of being a priest. I also enjoy being involved in the RCIA program in my parish. Being a convert myself, I enjoy seeing God's grace at work in others and sharing in their journey of faith. I also like the camaraderie of my brother priests.

**Q: What aspect of the priesthood do you find most challenging?**

**A:** I think the most challenging aspect of the priesthood for me has been dealing with the devastating effects that the culture of death has had on our society. Trying to bring healing and reconciliation to marriages and families that have been wounded by the effects of sin and the selfishness of our culture has been a great challenge for me. I believe abortion is still the greatest tragedy in our world today. We simply must regain a new respect and reverence for every human life, especially the most defenseless—the child in the womb. And I believe a large part of the answer to this challenge has been given to us by Pope John Paul II and his teachings on the theology of the body. I believe this is the Church's best kept secret. God has a beautiful plan for marriage and family life which remains largely unknown. This is all part of the challenge of the new evangelization. It is both challenging and exciting at the same time and I understand that there are some great initiatives under way here in the Denver Archdiocese to meet these challenges.

**Q: You baptized your parents into the Catholic faith in 1991. What was that experience like for you and did your conversion play a part in theirs?**

**A:** Next to the day of my ordination to the priesthood, the happiest day of my life was being able to administer the sacrament of baptism and confirmation to my mother and father, and receiving them into the Catholic Church. When I was growing up our family attended the Presbyterian Church. When I converted to the Catholic Church in college, my parents, although they were not thrilled, supported my decision. It was the same way when I entered the seminary and I know this was hard for them, being the only son. Even though they did not understand, they always supported me and for this I will forever be grateful.

My first assignment as a newly ordained priest in 1985 was St. Patrick's Parish in Wichita. My first pastor, Father Donal O'Hare, now retired, was and still is a wonderful, holy priest. Whenever my parents would come to Wichita to visit me, Father O'Hare would treat them with such goodness and kindness, as did the people of the parish. My parents were very struck by the way Catholics loved and respected their priests.

I was assigned to Rome for further studies from 1989-91, and my parents came to visit me during my second year. We actually met in England and worked our way down to Rome, retracing, as it were, the steps of the Reformation. They were very impressed with Rome and all of its rich history and tradition. When my parents returned from that trip in the fall, they began taking instruction classes from a priest friend of mine who was a pastor in Kansas City. When I completed my studies and returned to the diocese in the summer of 1991, they asked me to receive them into full communion with the Catholic Church.

**Q: You are part Native American and will be just the third Native American Catholic bishop, Denver Archbishop Chaput being one as well. What does your Native American heritage mean to you?**

**A:** My Native American ancestry comes from my paternal grandmother's side of the family. We descended from the Wea tribe, which broke away from the larger Miami tribe around 1750. My ancestors came to Kansas in 1844 from Indiana and settled south of Kansas City near a little town which is now known as Wea, Kan. Most of these relatives are all buried in the cemetery in Wea.

One of my aunts did the initial research on the background of our Native American lineage when I was in high school and, as a result, the family received a settlement from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which paid for a good part of my college education. My father eventually wrote a book for our family titled, "The Wea Tribe of Indians of the Northwest Territory," on the history of our Native American ancestry. I am very proud of my Wea ancestry.

**Q: You have served in parish ministry, as a Respect Life Office diocesan director, in campus ministry, as a theology instructor in Rome and as an official in the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops. Which of those apostolates did you most enjoy and how do you feel your ministry thus far will assist you in your role as an auxiliary bishop?**

**A:** I look back on my priesthood and I marvel at the goodness of the Lord. I have enjoyed every one of my assignments during my nearly 23 years of priesthood and they have all been very different. I think all of these experiences will help me in the episcopal ministry.

But because my own college years were so formative, I would have to say that my years in campus ministry have been the most enjoyable. I really enjoy that age because decisions are made that affect the rest of your life. In addition to my four and a half years as the Catholic chaplain at Wichita State University, when I was assigned to Rome to work in the Vatican, within a year I was offered a part-time job as the Catholic chaplain for the University of Dallas Rome Campus. Most of the priests in the Vatican have outside apostolates such as teaching or chaplaincy work. I think it's good to have some kind of pastoral outlet as a priest, when working in the Vatican. I ended up serving as the Rome chaplain at UD for six and a half years and I really enjoyed the work.

I'm told that the Church in Denver is young and is filled with opportunities for young people. I think that my experience in campus ministry, both on a very secular campus, as well as two very Catholic campuses, will help me in Denver. I think that this part of the country is ripe for the new evangelization, as envisioned by Pope John Paul II, and I look forward to being a part of this.

**Q: The last auxiliary bishop in Denver was Hispanic and while he served all the faithful, he had a special apostolate to Hispanics. Do you see yourself pursuing any special apostolate?**

**A:** I know that more than half the active Catholic population in the Archdiocese of Denver is Latino, and I look forward to serving them wholeheartedly. So much of the future of the Church depends on how well we reach young Hispanic Catholics, and I'm committed to doing that. At the same time, I don't really see myself specializing in one particular area of ministry as an auxiliary bishop. My job will be to help the archbishop, be a good brother to our priests, and serve all our people. I have always had a tremendous amount of respect for Archbishop Chaput and the great work he is doing here in Denver. I want to be of service to him in any way I can and I know that I have so very much to learn about being a bishop. I can't think of a better mentor than the archbishop and I look forward to serving the good people of northern Colorado under his leadership and guidance.

**Q: Colorado is known for its mountains, skiing and outdoor activities; do you have any hobbies or special interests?**

**A:** I still love to ski and hike in the mountains. I also love to run. A group of us in my parish ran the Chicago Marathon this past October. We trained together and ran as a team to raise money for the Parent Project for Muscular Dystrophy. One of our young parishioners has muscular dystrophy and we ran for him. The whole parish got involved and it was a lot of fun. I also ran the Rome marathon one year and did the Pike's Peak Ascent in 1996, but I don't think I would ever try that again! I played baseball until I was 18, but I guess the sport I like to play most now is golf. As far as special interests or hobbies, I love to read and I love to listen to music of all kinds.

**Q: Denver is home to several pro-sports teams. Do you have any favorite teams?**

**A:** I'm still very loyal to my alma mater and so I am a diehard KU basketball fan. This has been a great year for KU sports. One of my parishioners has a son who was a manager on the KU football team, and so I was able to get free tickets to the Orange Bowl in Miami when KU beat Virginia Tech. When we moved back to the Kansas City area when I was 8, my dad bought season tickets to the Kansas City Chiefs so I am well aware of the rivalry between the Chiefs and the Broncos. For some reason I am a big Phoenix Suns basketball fan but I really like the way the Denver Nuggets play, too.

**Q: Do you have any special message for the faithful in the Denver Archdiocese?**

**A:** First of all, I ask for your prayers that I might be a good shepherd after the heart of the Good Shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ. I am very humbled by the confidence that the Holy Father has placed in me in calling me to the office of auxiliary bishop. I realize that he has laid upon my shoulders a huge responsibility, and I will count on the prayers of the good people of northern Colorado and the grace of the Holy Spirit to carry out my duties faithfully. It is my sincere hope and prayer that I am able to assist Archbishop Chaput in his pastoral ministry with courage, humility and joy.

While I am excited to meet the people of the Denver Archdiocese, I am sad to be leaving my home diocese of Wichita and my native state of Kansas. I love my parish of Blessed Sacrament and it has been a privilege being pastor of this wonderful parish. My parishioners have been so good to me since I became their pastor over a year and a half ago and I will miss them dearly.

I look forward to meeting all the priests of the archdiocese and getting to know them as brothers. The priests of this archdiocese have a great reputation for ability and integrity. I will look to the priests of the archdiocese to help me to get to know the archdiocese. I'm excited by the fact that there are two seminaries in the archdiocese and I want to help our priests in any way I can, to deepen the friendship and support between priests and to promote vocations to the priesthood.

Finally, I pray for the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church and Mother of Priests, to help me in this new mission, that I might be docile and obedient to the actions of the Holy Spirit. May I have a portion of her faith and trust in accepting the will of God in my life.

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