

Brooklyn pastor 'always wanted to serve God'

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Jan. 21, 2014 Conversations with Sr. Camille

Msgr. David L. Cassato

Age: 66

Profession: Pastor at St. Athanasius Church

Lives in: Brooklyn, N.Y.

People in Msgr. David Cassato's neighborhood affectionately call him "The Pope of Bensonhurst." In his current parish of St. Athanasius as well as his previous parish, he has been likened to the father of a large Italian family at whose table there is room for everyone, regardless of race, color or creed. His booming voice is warm with welcome, and laughter comes easily. The Eucharist he celebrates is surely a time of thanksgiving and rejoicing.

***Sr. Camille:* What do you think inspires your attitude and outreach?**

Cassato: I love what I do. I always wanted to serve God.

In 2001, the year you became pastor of St. Athanasius, you were also appointed a chaplain of the New York City Police Department. We'll talk about that later, but first I'd like to learn about the family that nurtured your vocation. What was your childhood like and where and with whom did you spend it?

I grew up in Canarsie, Brooklyn. We were a simple Italian (Sicilian) family. I lived in a home with my grandmother and grandfather on the first floor; my parents, my younger brother and me on the second floor; and my aunt and uncles on the third floor. I spent my summers in the country in Brentwood, Long Island, with family members.

What schools did you attend?

I attended the following schools: Holy Family Elementary School, St. John's Prep, Cathedral College, and the Seminary of Our Lady of Angels. All four are now closed. The only one of my learning centers that survives is Niagara University.

Did you have role models?

Yes, Msgr. Ralph Florido and Franciscan Sisters of Ringwood, N.J.

What made them inspirational?

In so many ways they touched me through their kindness, their stories and their example. Some people harbor negative memories of the sisters who taught them. All my memories are positive.

Can you name anyone who especially encouraged you to become a priest?

My eighth-grade teacher, Franciscan Sr. Gemma. She passed away a few years ago.

What about being a priest is most satisfying?

Helping people. Priests have so many ways of doing that. Sometimes it's as simple as giving a gift that meets another's need -- food, for example -- or makes them happy. People are so good to us that we have a lot of things to pass along. But there are more complex opportunities, such as helping to get them into good schools. Then in the sacramental area, we have the opportunity to give them much-needed direction as people struggle to make the right life choices.

On July 29, 2009, Denis Hamill, [writing in the New York Daily News](#)[1], quoted you: "If I ever retire, I want to become a full-time priest again." What did you mean by that?

I would like to be free of administration.

How would you spend the extra time that freedom would allow?

First of all, I'd like to spend more time visiting parishioners in hospitals and personally making Communion calls and listening to people's concerns. The basis of building a parish lies in simple pastoral acts, like visiting the sick and elderly.

What do you consider your current challenges?

I would very much like to bring estranged Catholics back to the faith.

How can you do that?

One way is by spending time talking to people, one on one. So many have an inaccurate understanding of our church. They need to know the church isn't primarily built on rules and regulations, but on relationship with God and one another. Pope Francis is certainly setting that example.

A priest friend of mine said he considers you one of the best models and mentors for seminarians and young priests. What advice do you have to offer them?

Like Pope Francis said, "Smell like the sheep"; you have to be in the midst of your people. Priesthood isn't a place of privilege.

You're absolutely right about that. *TIME* magazine honored Pope Francis as its Person of the Year "for bringing the church out of the palace into the streets."

Did you have the benefit of a valuable mentor yourself?

Yes, Fr. Gabriel Lucantoni.

Can you share a single piece of advice he gave you?

Yes. He cautioned us to know the difference about what really is important. He said, "Don't get caught up in petty things. Live a life of service."

What nourishes your faith and your priesthood?

The faith of the many good people who share my ministry.

Although I would guess there are many answers to this question, I wonder if you would describe one particular time you were grateful you became a priest.

The way it freed me to care for my dying parents. My father, especially, wasn't happy about my decision to become a priest. But he changed his thinking and was proud the day I was ordained. As time went on, my parents realized that while my married brother had many commitments to his family, I was more at liberty to care for them.

Among the many others who are grateful that you became a priest are members of religious communities, beginning with my own Sisters of Mercy, but especially the Sisters of St. Joseph stationed in your parish's elementary and high school and share pastoral ministry. No one, they say, could be more generous to them than you are. Why is this so?

The sisters in my early childhood left a tremendous impact on my life. Today, the sisters' commitment to their work and ministry remains an incredible witness.

An item in the St. Joseph College newsletter identifies you as an important player in helping victims of Superstorm Sandy. What kind of help did you provide?

I was present in the Rockaways that suffered so much storm damage. I also helped my parishioners and others who suffered losses. As a parish, we conducted a food and clothing drive.

What is your favorite Scripture passage and does it make in difference in your life?

"I am in your midst as one who serves." I had this printed on my ordination card.

Anything particularly encouraging or discouraging in today's church?

It's discouraging to know there is a closed attitude in the lack of inclusion by some priests.

As I noted at the start of this conversation, neighborhood people have called you "The Pope of Bensonhurst." Why do you think they say that?

Maybe because I have a big head. I don't see it really. But I know people see me as a strong leader.

I'd be interested in knowing how you feel about our current Pope Francis.

I love him. He's a breath of fresh air.

David, both at parties and in the pulpit, you've said you'd like to be a priest for "desperate housewives" I think there's a serious strain beneath your kidding about that. What do you mean?

I really think people need to talk, and I'm willing to listen as long as I can help them.

How do you relax?

On rare occasions, I take a walk by the water and like to shop at Macy's.

Do you have a favorite TV program?

"Blue Bloods"

Movie?

"Moonstruck"

Author?

Edgar Allan Poe

Food?

A good steak and mashed potatoes

How do you pray?

Quietly, before the Blessed Sacrament

What causes you sorrow?

Kids not going to church

What causes you joy?

Good Sunday liturgy

What gives you hope?

Young families active in the parish

Is there something you wish I had asked?

I wish you had asked if, given the choice, would I become a priest . My answer is yes! I would do it again.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audiobook, renamed *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption*, [is available](#) [2] from Now You Know Media.]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Sr. Camille's column, Conversations with Sr. Camille, is posted. Go to this page and follow directions: [Email alert signup](#) [3].

Source URL (retrieved on 07/25/2017 - 05:47): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/conversations-sr-camille/brooklyn-pastor-always-wanted-serve-god>

Links:

[1] <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/brooklyn/neighborhood-rallies-brooklyn-parish-article-1.379205>

[2] <http://www.nowyouknowmedia.com/stories-of-forgiveness.html>

[3] <http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup>