

Cape's new archbishop on his new position

He believes in an open door policy, is knowledgeable in significant pastoral areas and has a passion for justice. MICHAEL RASSOOL spoke to Stephen Brislin, the archbishop-elect of Cape Town.

BISHOP Stephen Brislin, appointed new archbishop of Cape Town, feels that his more than 20 years' experience as vicar-general, diocesan administrator and bishop of Kroonstad has prepared him for his new post as leader of South Africa's mother diocese.

He considers it wise of the apostolic nuncio, the Vatican Congregation for the Evangelisation of the Peoples and, ultimately, Pope Benedict (who has the final say) to appoint someone with episcopal experience to an archdiocese such as Cape Town. Such experience invariably augurs well for the position and the person who occupies it. The archbishop-elect won't say, however, that he'll be going to Cape Town with full confidence, because he has much to learn about his new situation and its people.

He said he received the news of his appointment from the apostolic nuncio, Archbishop James P Green, with mixed feelings, as he had lived and worked in Kroonstad diocese all his life, except for periods of study elsewhere, and was "leaving the familiar for the unfamiliar".

More than 30 years ago, he had studied at the University of Cape Town and attained a degree in psychology, and he still has friends in the city and its environs, so the place is not completely strange to him. Bishop Brislin said despite a sense of the uncertain, he was looking forward to meeting his new flock and getting to know the archdiocese, and to apply his experience to its challenges.

As bishop of Kroonstad he was faced with major problems in the rural Free State diocese, such as high levels of HIV/Aids infection on the goldfields of Welkom/Virginia as well as extensive social needs. He also played a leading role in promoting vocations, heading up the diocese's vocations commission.

The diocese currently has six candidates at the national seminary, an unprecedented number seen as a very good reflection and a great sign of hope for the local Church. The archbishop-elect—whom wags in the archdiocese have dubbed Stephen II, in reference to the late Archbishop Stephen Naidoo who died in 1980—hopes to build on the successes in this area of his predecessor in Cape Town, Archbishop Lawrence Henry, and others that went before.

He said he has heard people speak of the many challenges of the Cape Town archdiocese, and he was due to arrive there early this month to meet its consultants, including the two vicars-general and Archbishop Henry, to arrive at a more definite perspective on things.

He was also due to meet others, and through all this essential contact acquire some important insights into the challenges and foster hope for the Cape Town Church's future. As in Kroonstad, Bishop Brislin said he wishes to work closely with priests, but also with lay people, especially in light of a post-Vatican II Church.

Vatican II, he pointed out, changed the Church's outlook and its witnessing to Christ, calling on Catholics to play a range of roles in Church life. "The participation of various groups of people is important to the vision of the Church," said Bishop Brislin.

Thus, he said, the work of well run lay initiatives in Cape Town archdiocese will enjoy his encouragement.

"We all need to form a common vision together, a shared experience, something that needs to be done with proper guidance and through maximum participation from as many people in the Church as possible," he said.

Bishop Brislin was born in Welkom, Kroonstad diocese, on September 24, 1956 and ordained a priest in November 1983, having joined the seminary after receiving his degree. Before assuming pastoral responsibilities in the diocese, the young priest was sent to study at the Missionary Institute in London, where Catholic theological training is given

to those who operate within a missionary and multicultural context, focusing on issues of justice and peace.

At the time of his appointment to Kroonstad, for example, he cited reconciliation between communities as a priority.

He believes a contextual theological approach has given him a broader perspective that has influenced his pastoral ministry. Evangelisation, a perennial theme of the bishop's conference, cannot take place in a vacuum. One must understand the people's struggles, read the signs of the times, the prevailing atmosphere, opinions and world views.

"Unless one understands these things, one cannot reach others through the Gospel," Bishop Brislin said.

Pleased with Bishop Brislin's appointment is Fr Peter-John Pearson, director of the bishops' Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office, because of the prelate's interest in issues of social justice, with a good track record in this area, and a real commitment to the people of Africa.

Bishop Brislin and other South African Church leaders, for example, travelled to Sudan in late 2008 to express solidarity with the Church of that war-torn country. The South African delegation, whose visit was organised by the Pretoria-based Denis Hurley Peace Institute, heard the most harrowing details of death and destruction in a long-running conflict, and of priests' trauma despite playing a pivotal role in dynamic, motivated, committed, faith- and hope-filled ways.

"One can look forward to a meeting between the archbishop-elect's pastoralism and that kind of passion for justice issues," Fr Pearson said.

Also pleased is Fr Harrie Hovers, parish priest of St Michael's church in Rondebosch, who studied for the priesthood with the archbishop-elect. Fr Hovers said although he has had little contact with the prelate since their seminary days, his reputation for being committed, caring, hard-working and knowledgeable in significant areas of pastoral ministry, citing justice and peace as one, precedes him. He believes his former classmate will make "a fine archbishop".

Fr Douglas Wiseman of Christ the King parish in Pinelands said he and the archbishop-elect were new priests together in Kroonstad diocese, living in the same house. Fr Wiseman said he was always struck by his special gifts, his goodness and dedication. Even after Fr Wiseman had left the diocese in 1991, he would hear much about the success of his confrère's pastoral work.

In Kroonstad, Bishop Brislin served in Virginia, Kroonstad, Odendaalsrus/Kutlwanong and Motsethabong. The late Bishop Johannes Brenninkmeijer appointed him vicar-general in July 1988. He served in this capacity until the bishop's death in July 2003, when he was appointed diocesan administrator, a post he held until being named bishop in October 2006.

He holds that it is important to respect and make allowances for differences between parishes, which do reflect the communities they serve, and it doesn't pay to insist on uniformity among them. Diversity in the Church, Bishop Brislin said, is something that must be respected at all times.

He said whatever the circumstances, participation of the people in the life of the parish—whether liturgical life or any other aspect, or forming Bible study groups or faith-sharing groups—is an opportunity for them to deepen their spirituality.

Priests have spoken of the prelate's openness in discussing issues and his readiness to engage with others. As far as possible, the archbishop-elect said, he would continue this "open door" policy, and try to remain contactable by cellphone.

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