

Two bishops, two homecomings

Hero, Dabrowski make their return

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For new Hamilton bishop, renewal starts with people

Dabrowski aims for a ministry of presence

BY LUKE MANDATO
The Catholic Register

On Feb. 2, Bishop Joseph Dabrowski will arrive at Christ the King Basilica not as a stranger, but as a familiar shepherd returning home to Ontario as the Diocese of Hamilton prepares to officially welcome the 10th bishop in its 170-year history.

With an extensive history of service in Southern Ontario, including as an associate pastor and pastor in various parishes across the neighbouring Diocese of London, and as Auxiliary Bishop in London from 2015 to 2023, Dabrowski returns to the province with a new mission.

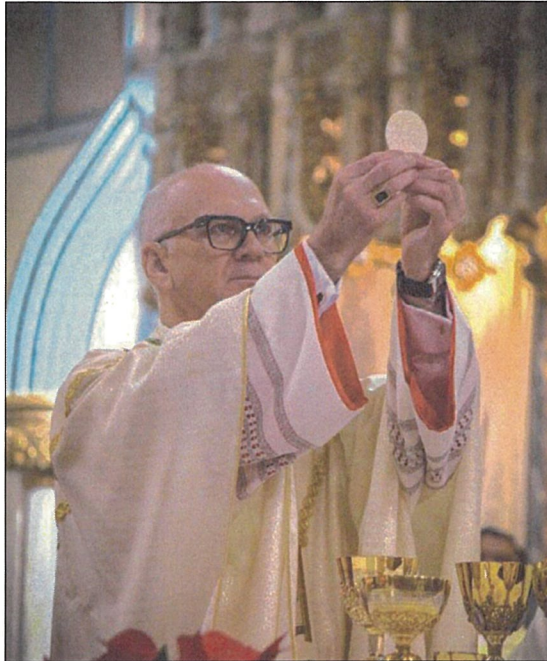
His installation on Feb. 2 will come just two-and-a-half years after leading Prince Edward Island's Catholics as the Bishop of Charlottetown. As he recalled, the news of his new appointment was an unexpected shakeup and a call he won't soon forget, but an opportunity he accepted in great faith nonetheless.

"I received the call while in a remote area outside of Charlottetown, and so the connection wasn't great. I wasn't sure if I heard properly. I asked the Nuncio (Archbishop Ivan Jurković) to repeat, and all I could hear at first was 'Hamilton, Hamilton,'" he told *The Catholic Register*. "I received it with an open heart and was humbled, but at the same time, grateful to the Holy Father for warning me to take care of such a great diocese."

Despite the 1,800 kilometres between Charlottetown and Hamilton, Dabrowski is adamant that the many lessons that shaped his short tenure on Canada's east coast will apply in one way or another to his new mission in Hamilton. Of these, listening, presence and accompaniment remain at the forefront.

"Very early on in PEI, I realized that the most important thing I could do was to listen, to be present, and of course, pray. Being open to listening to priests, parish leaders, the diocesan team, young people and volunteers taught me that renewal does not begin with structures or plans, but with understanding people's lives and hopes — that approach shapes everything else," he said.

The goal of fervent accompaniment has been at the root of the native of Poland's vocation as far back as his experiences as a young boy in the village of Wysoka Strzyżowska in the country's south.



Bishop Joseph Dabrowski, above celebrating the 2025 Jubilee Year Closing Mass with the Diocese of Charlottetown, and below in a Jubilee Year group wedding photo. (Photos from Sandra Bourque)



A faith life growing quietly out of family life, Dabrowski's early vocation was supported through daily prayer, Sunday Masses and devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Joseph and the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

His uncle, a priest, was also a key influence in his younger life, perhaps not through direct encouragement, but as a visual testament to a life of joyful service. It's a life that Dabrowski has since emulated, still with his uncle in mind.

"His way of serving people and being with them really inspired me. You could tell he loved being a priest, and as a young person, I

remember thinking that it was a life worth living," he said.

Dabrowski began serving as an altar boy as young as Grade 2, later attending a high school run by the Congregation of St. Michael the Archangel (the Michaelite Fathers), where his vocation matured. After completing one year of the novitiate, he made his first profession to the Michaelites in 1982 and graduated from the Pontifical Athenaeum of St. Anselmo in Rome, obtaining his Master of Divinity in 1991.

He was ordained to the priesthood in May of 1991 in Italy at the Pontifical Sanctuary of Santa Maria ad Rupes. Assigned to join the Mi-

chaelite community in London, Ont., he would go on to serve as Vice Superior, Advisor, Vice Provincial and Superior of the North American Vice Province.

Southern Ontario has been home to Dabrowski under many titles and several communities for over 30 years, giving him a unique, established perspective on certain pastoral realities such as parish life and the challenges that face local churches in the province. He spoke to the balancing act of his past pastoral work, such as a close connection with London Bishop Ronald Fabbro, to the challenge of succeeding Hamilton's Bishop Douglas Crosby, who is set to retire upon Dabrowski's accession.

"There is something deeply meaningful about returning to a place where relationships already exist and that faith has grown through. Those relationships and coming back to Hamilton feel less like starting from zero and more like continuing a journey, one that began many years ago," he said.

"As for (Crosby), those are big shoes to fill for me at this time. The Diocese of Hamilton has already done great work and set a strong foundation. I begin with respect and gratitude for his ministry, as he has been a faithful shepherd with a heart of a true pastor, guiding the diocese with such wisdom, courage and compassion, and I carry that forward with humility."

Still, an element that Dabrowski is hoping to leverage is his multicultural outlook, able to celebrate the Catholic faith in English, his native Polish, Italian and Spanish, while also having previously studied French, Russian and Latin.

Seeing diversity not as something to manage but rather a gift to be welcomed, his efforts in Hamilton will be well spent, as the 2021 census shows 25.9 per

cent of the city's population is foreign-born immigrants. For each of them, he shared his hopes that the Church in Hamilton, much like the Universal Church, continues to be a place of unity, evangelization, service and dialogue in an ever-increasingly polarized world.

Following his Feb. 2 installation, Hamilton's newest shepherd plans to follow the current liturgical and diocesan calendar, rather than rush to launch new initiatives immediately. Shortly after following the installation, Dabrowski will celebrate Mass with the diocesan community on the First Sunday of Lent.

Still, he listed his top priorities as continuing to be present, celebrating, listening and evaluating next steps as he gets to know the people now entrusted to his care.

Even with a full calendar and a new mission in front of him, Dabrowski's humility shines through in his gentle message to the Hamilton faithful. Rather than asking them to follow him, he graciously invites each to come together, leading the way and allowing himself to

I'm here to listen, support and be close to them'

Bishop Dabrowski

accompany them.

"My message is a simple thank you, and I ask that you please pray for me. I come to them with a great respect for the journey they already made, and with a sincere desire to walk alongside them. I'm here to listen, support and be close to them, especially in the realities of everyday life with their joys and struggles," he said.

"When I was leaving the Diocese of Charlottetown, I thanked the people for allowing me to be the bridge, and I'm hoping that once again down the line I can say the same thing, that is 'Thank you for allowing me, not only to these build bridges, but also being trusting enough to cross those bridges together with me.'"

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