

Deacon Tim Massanelli serves state and Church faithfully

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |

Deacon Tim Massanelli was part of the landscape at the State Capitol as house parliamentarian for 38 years, but family and faith are the true testament of his life.

“I have a very high regard for the House of Representatives. I have a deep sense of loyalty to them, but the greatest thing that happened to me in my life — following my marriage and my family which is number one — was when I was ordained a deacon Nov. 7, 1981. That was a highlight of my life and still is.”

He grew up on a farm in Pine Bluff and lived there for nearly 70 years before moving to Little Rock about eight years ago.

What was supposed to be only for one session to help out his friend G. W. “Buddy” Turner turned into a lifetime at the State Capitol.

In 1973, Turner was elected speaker of the house in the Arkansas House of Representatives, and he asked Massanelli to come with him.

Turner had forgotten he’d promised the job to Armitage Harper, so Massanelli volunteered to help out as an advisor. In 1975, the new speaker, Cecil Alexander, asked if Massanelli would continue. He agreed and became the official parliamentarian during that session after Harper died.

Instead of two years, he stayed for 38.

“The parliamentarian sits beside the speaker at the podium, advises the speaker on the propriety of motions — whether they are proper or not, how many votes they take, whether they’re debatable or not and helps him with recognition of the members in the chamber. Having said that, that doesn’t mean to say that the speakers are not wise enough or intelligent enough to know those things. That’s kind of a two-person job up there. His focus is on the legislation and my focus is on the procedure. The combination of us makes it work,” he said.

In the world of changing politics, Massanelli was a fixture of permanence.

“Here comes this new guy and truth of the matter is that most of that stuff you know more about it than he does. If you’ve been there for 39 years like I have, I know more about most of that stuff than a whole bunch of them over there. But you can’t let them know that,” Massanelli said. “I’m devoted. I spent my life there. I know the rules. I know what they are. I wrote most of them, and they know that. That goes a long way with them respecting what you tell them,” he said.

In November, he stepped down because of health problems. He calls it retirement, but that doesn’t rule out him still having a presence in the House.

During his work as parliamentarian, he also found the path toward the diaconate.

He credits Dottie Massanelli, his wife of 58 years this February, as the push that put him on the path toward becoming a deacon.

“It’s been so satisfying,” he said. “One of the greatest, greatest, greatest things, that I wish all of y’all could experience, is serving at the Mass during the Eucharist as a deacon. That is extremely fulfilling to me as a deacon.”

His expertise in legislative policies and procedures was invaluable in working on social justice issues as a deacon. He was able to advise the bishop and others on the steps to take on legislation related to Catholic social teaching. He and Bishop Andrew J. McDonald had a long-standing agreement.

"I was his eyes and ears, but not his mouth. If he wanted to speak, I could advise him on what to do," he said.

While he's retired as a deacon, he still assists at Mass at Our Lady of the Holy Souls Church in Little Rock. As a deacon, he baptized all seven of his grandchildren, gave them their first Communion and attended all of their confirmations.

He said he hopes his work in the legislature, the diaconate and his family did some good.

"My family and the diaconate is one of the greatest things that happened to me. Sometimes I can't grasp how did I get here. Why was I so lucky to be pushed or pulled?" he said. "We live each day as a blessing."