

Amen: Father Mike's field hospital

By Paul McMullen

" ... Hear our petition for an end to the violence which has overcome the City of Baltimore. ..."

As he has nearly every day since spring 2015, Father Mike Orchik led the Prayer for Peace and Justice, created by the Archdiocese of Baltimore in the aftermath of Freddie Gray's death, during Mass at the Shrine of the Little Flower Feb. 7.

It was the 38th day of 2017. The day before, the city registered its 40th homicide of the year.

The sanctity of life is an increasing concern not just in Sandtown-Winchester, but in neighborhoods such as Belair-Edison, too. Good jobs at Beth Steel and the GM plant went away, along with the families who filled since-closed Little Flower School with as many as 1,700 children in the late 1950s.

As addiction, unemployment and violent crime grew along lower Belair Road, so did the presence of Father Mike.

March 9 will mark his 25th anniversary as the longest-serving pastor of Little Flower. A formal recognition was suggested. Humble and unassuming, the 76-year-old priest declined. Forgive us, Father Mike; we're talking about you anyway.

Garry Brown left his boyhood home on Chesterfield Avenue and settled in Perry Hall, but returns to Little Flower and serves as a corporator. He describes finance committee meetings with "a half-dozen knocks on the door."

"When people come in off the street looking for help," Brown said, "Father Mike

talks to them and shares the assets we have. He gives of his own wealth, not that he has any. He drives an old Buick; one of the mirrors is knocked off.”

In 2003, a gunman forced his way into the parish offices and stole about \$8,000 from the Sunday collection and petty cash. Father Mike kept answering the door, telling the Review in 2012, “if we’re going to function as a Christian community in the city, we have to be responsible to the needs of the people.”

His stewardship has been challenged, both by dwindling resources and his being an exemplar of Matthew 6:3: “But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing.”

“Pope Francis calls the church a field hospital,” said Father Mark Bialek, pastor of St. John in Westminster. “The Shrine of the Little Flower and other city parishes take on that meaning in many ways. A lot of people are hurting, struggling and touched by violence every day. He’s a pastor who is willing to be with them and stay with them.”

Father Bialek was in the seventh grade at Little Flower School when Father Mike arrived. In rapid order, he graduated from altar server to sacristan, lector, maintenance man and office helper.

“Whenever the opportunity presented itself, he gave me more responsibility,” Father Bialek said. “It helped me discern more fully entering the priesthood. Without that experience and support, I might not make that leap.”

Tony Magliano, a nationally-syndicated Catholic columnist, worked as a pastoral associate at the Shrine from 1999 to 2016. He recalls Father Mike’s generosity of spirit, which included regularly joining the prayer vigils outside an abortion clinic in Overlea.

“Wearing his collar, that was a real witness to passersby,” Magliano said. “Father Mike helped the Legion of Mary knock on 800 doors in the neighborhood. How many priests go door to door?”

That dignity toward all, which ranges from taking time for both Project Gabriel and those recently released from prison, is what Father Bialek describes as Father Mike’s embrace of the “seamless tapestry of life, from conception to natural death.”

“Some focus on a specific issue,” Father Bialek said. “He wants to help all people, regardless of their situation, whether it’s a child before they’re born, the sick and vulnerable, or those who might need a second chance.”