

Arlington bishop leads prayer service for Virginia Tech victims

ANNANDALE, Va. – Hundreds of parishioners gathered with Arlington Bishop Paul S. Loverde at Holy Spirit Church in Annandale April 22 for an evening prayer service for the Virginia Tech victims and their families.

Many of those in attendance sported the Blacksburg university's familiar colors of maroon and orange as a sign of solidarity with the community in the neighboring Diocese of Richmond. A university banner hung in the church vestibule and to the side of the altar.

The parish originally planned a quiet evening of meditation, music, prayer and healing featuring Irish tenor Mark Forrest. But when the tragedy unfolded on the Blacksburg campus April 16, the parish quickly shifted its focus to the memory of the victims.

"The church of Arlington is a family of faith, brothers and sisters united through and with and in Jesus Christ," said Bishop Loverde in his opening reflection. "As family members we share joy and sorrow."

He said the prayer service at Holy Spirit Church was a visible sign that the diocese was supporting all those who were part of the devastating tragedy at Virginia Tech, particularly the faculty, students, staff and alumni.

"What does our praying do?" the bishop asked. "Does it remove the pain of loss, the sorrow of separation? Praying allows us to see the same reality that others see differently, through the eyes of faith.

"Lord, give to those who were so senselessly and innocently killed life without end in your presence," the bishop prayed. "Give to those so needlessly wounded renewed health of body, the healing of their painful memories and strength of soul. Give to the families and friends of all the victims consolation in their grief, the grace of perseverance and true hope.

Give to each member of the Virginia Tech community the ability to move forward

from this place of pain to a new future rooted in hope-filled unity.”

Bishop Loverde also asked the Lord to forgive the gunman, Seung-Hui Cho, and “to have pity on his family,” which is struggling “with profound shame and broken hearts.”

“If we emerge from this devastating tragedy more life-giving, more life-sustaining, more life-protecting, then those who died will not have died in vain, but with you, will have been the instruments of life triumphing over death and evil,” the bishop said.

Father Terry Specht, administrator of Holy Spirit Parish, announced that the special collection taken up at the end of the prayer service would be sent to Virginia Tech’s campus ministry office.

As students returned to class April 23, parishes and priests in the Arlington Diocese continued to show their support in many ways.

Father Brian Bashista, diocesan vocations director and a 1987 Virginia Tech graduate, went to Blacksburg April 18 to assist Father James Arsenault at St. Mary Parish and to provide counseling to the first responders and students.

He said throughout the week St. Mary Church was a haven for the police and first responders. Many of the emergency medical technicians were students who were the first to arrive on the scene. They had lunch and dinner at the parish every night.

“It was very rough, what they saw and the images in their minds,” Father Bashista told the Arlington Catholic Herald, the diocesan newspaper. “Many of them wanted to talk about their experiences.”

Father Bashista also was the celebrant and homilist of the evening Mass April 22 at the War Memorial Chapel on campus.

Father James R. Gould, pastor of St. Raymond of Penafort Parish in Fairfax, traveled to Virginia Tech April 24 to spend time with students from his parish. He was scheduled to celebrate Mass at the campus Newman Center and then take the students to Norris Hall and West Ambler Johnson dormitory to anoint the areas

where the shootings took place.

He brought individual holy water containers for everyone so the whole group could partake in the anointing. He wanted to show the young people that those areas can become holy ground again.