

Catholic Men's Fellowship continues to branch out

It's a Saturday morning in February, when many a working man is enjoying an extra hour of sleep. Cars pull off of Harford Road and onto the lot behind St. Ursula in Parkville, where sunrise over Essex peeks through bare trees.

Inside the parish's St. Francis of Assisi Conference Room, at 7:10 a.m., coffee is percolating and so is the conversation. Monsignor James P. Farmer, pastor, is flanked by tables and two dozen men, who are in the process of reconciling the second half of the strong, silent stereotype they were taught to model as boys.

For the members of the St. Ursula chapter of the Catholic Men's Fellowship of Maryland, unity is found in sharing.

A typical CMF meeting includes preparation for the weekend's Mass readings, group discussion and prayer requests for members and their loved ones. Jim Webbert asks all to remember his father, who is on his deathbed.

Rob Commodari, this meeting's leader, acknowledges that "it's great to feel the energy here today." He has prepared a presentation on the Blessed Virgin Mary.

"How many times," Mr. Commodari asks during the meeting, "does God call us and we say no? She (Mary) said yes."

At one point, Monsignor Farmer is asked to interject.

"We have too rosy a picture of her life," he explains. "We believe that Mary was somewhere between 14 and 16 when she gave birth to Jesus. She witnessed her son's execution and was widowed. Jesus in her womb, there's a great pro-life message there."

At 8 a.m. Mass, Fellowship members join several hundred in a congregation that other parishes might be grateful for on Sunday. After Monsignor Farmer directs all to "follow the shepherd, not the wolves," the Fellowship returns to the conference

room.

After being serenaded on his 62nd birthday, Monsignor Farmer, his left arm in a sling due to elbow surgery, blows out a candle on a cupcake. Discussion resumes among a Fellowship chapter that includes Deacons Frank Rongione and Robert Keenan.

Monsignor Farmer, the chaplain to the CMF of Maryland, finally succeeded in forming a chapter at St. Ursula last year.

“For a couple of years, he asked the men to start one (a chapter) here,” says Bob Gilson, a past Grand Knight of the Knights of Columbus Bishop Sebastian Council 5058. “We kept hearing what the Fellowship meant for other parishes.”

One of those models is Immaculate Conception in Towson. It shares a campus with Towson Catholic High School, which will be the site of the 12th annual Catholic Men’s Fellowship of Maryland Conference March 21 (see accompanying information box).

“We’ve had men from at least 62 parishes attend the conference the last three years,” says Gil Hoffman, the president of the CMF of Maryland and a parishioner of Immaculate Conception. “At least 20 parishes in the archdiocese have Fellowship chapters, and we encourage the formation of more.”

Back at St. Ursula, Mr. Commadori refers discussion to a world gone wrong when it lacks divine inspiration.

“In our society, people are fearful of getting too close to God,” he says. “The devil pulls out all the stops to see how serious we are about our relationship with God.”

The Catholic Men’s Fellowship aims to strengthen that bond.

“Our first aim is to get Catholic men together to pray and support each other in this difficult time of moral confusion in our country,” Monsignor Farmer said. “When they get together, they realize that other men share their faith and are willing to express it. A lot of men have been helped by this organization.”

Catholic Men's Fellowship of Maryland

12th annual conference

March 21, 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Towson Catholic High School

Fee: \$35, \$20 for students. Includes continental breakfast and lunch.

Highlights: Featured speakers include Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien; Father Phillip F. Chavez, founder of The Amator Institute; and Mark Houck, founder of The King's Men. Program concludes with 4 p.m. Mass.

Information: www.catholicmensfellowship.com; telephone 443-910-7702.