

Catholics honor Baltimore's homeless at memorial

Wearing a black tattered coat, gloves with a hole in the left palm and a knit skull cap, a homeless woman calling herself Miss L.A. shed a tear as Baltimore City political leaders called out the names of her fellow street dwellers who died in the past year.

The 16th Homeless Persons' Memorial Service held Dec. 21 at Baltimore's War Memorial Plaza, drew about 200 candle-holding spectators and gave Miss L.A. ample opportunity to beg for change.

Undeterred after being turned down by several of those gathered, including parishioners from all over the Baltimore metropolitan area and people who make their home in the nearby park in front of St. Vincent de Paul, Baltimore, she continued her quest for cash as the bells tolled 88 times, one for each reported death of the city's homeless.

The number is five more than what was reported last year, a discouraging fact for Loyola College Junior Ashley Biggs, who also coordinates her campus Caravan. That group delivers sandwiches, drinks and fellowship Monday and Tuesday evenings to the homeless who reside in the St. Vincent de Paul park.

"It's depressing," said Biggs, 19, who attends Mass at Loyola. "We should have five less names on that list. It doesn't seem right."

The New Jersey native was inspired by the large crowd at this year's memorial service and said media attention given to the efforts of the city's faith-based organizations and government to end homelessness in the region in the next 10 years has spurred others to join the cause that is so important to her.

"There are so many more people out here this year and that gives me hope that maybe we aren't just spinning our wheels," Ms. Biggs said. "The fact that more (homeless) people died this year doesn't mean we should give up. We can't forget about the people who are suffering while we are working for a solution."

The solution will come in the form affordable housing, higher wages and aggressive substance abuse treatment programs, said St. Ursula, Parkville parishioner John Schiavone, who is also executive director of St. Vincent de Paul of Baltimore, a group that has partnered with city organizations to combat homelessness.

“There are no quick solutions to this problem,” Mr. Schiavone said of the estimated 30,000 people in Baltimore who will find themselves homeless at one time or another in the next year. “This is not a problem that deteriorated over night and it won’t get a solution over night.”

With the backdrop of City Hall and its lit-up Christmas tree, Baltimore Health Commissioner Dr. Joshua Sharfstein announced that volunteers came forward the morning after the I Can homeless shelter next to St. Ann’s on Greenmount Ave. was shut down for fire safety violations, and got the building up to code in time to re-open it’s doors that evening for it’s 70 male occupants.

“The city’s winter shelter is also opened all winter this year,” Dr. Sharfstein told the cheering crowd. “Last year the shelter didn’t open its doors unless the temperature dropped below 32 degrees.”

Missing from the 88 names was Roy Whitaker, who died earlier in December at St. Bernadette, Severn, a parish that was hosting Anne Arundel County’s faith-based traveling winter shelter.

Though he was homeless, Mr. Whitaker’s name wasn’t included because he didn’t die outdoors.

The parish hall housed 29 men and four women during week of Dec. 4, and volunteers discovered Mr. Whitaker’s lifeless body in one of the beds on Dec. 11, the final day St. Bernadette’s hosted the traveling program, said Joe Dulany, the church’s shelter coordinator.

“It was quite a shock to everyone,” Mr. Dulany said. “But, at least he died after having a nice meal, surrounded by people who cared about him and in a warm bed, instead of out on the street.”

The homeless epidemic in a wealthy country like the United States of America is a

national disgrace, said Baltimore City Councilman James B. Kraft, who urged people at the memorial service to examine their own prosperity and determine what they could give to help those in need.

“We need community will and political will,” to address the homeless crisis, he said. “We’re asking for just a little kindness.”