

Columbia parish celebrates 50 years as a community united in diversity

COLUMBIA - Beneath a bright blue sky, parishioners of St. John the Evangelist brought lawn chairs and blankets as they gathered on the lawn of the Wilde Lake Interfaith Center in Columbia Sept. 9 to celebrate a vigil Mass marking the parish's 50th anniversary and the 40th anniversary of the parish's Hispanic community.

Archbishop William E. Lori led the day's bilingual Mass with music from both Spanish and English choirs. Joining in the celebration were 10 priests and two deacons, including Father Gerard Bowen, St. John's current pastor, and associate pastors, Father Eugene Nickol, Father Ferdinand Ezenwachi and Father Leandro Fazolini, associate pastor.

Also among the celebrants was a face familiar to many longtime parishioners, Monsignor Richard Tillman, who was St. John's pastor from 1977 to 2010.

St. John, home to 3,200 families, operates out of two interfaith centers in Columbia alongside congregations of various faith backgrounds. When Father Tillman arrived there were four different congregations, but today the Wilde Lake Interfaith center, which is undergoing a \$1.5 million renovation of its gathering space, is shared by just St. John's parish and a Methodist-Presbyterian congregation.

"It impressed me from the very beginning, people said we are going to try to stick together in this," recalled Father Tillman during his homily. "There are going to be some high points and some low points, but we're going to be together. We're going to form something that says relationships are important."

The concept of the interfaith center stems from the city's own beginning 50 years ago during a time when the United States was still grappling with segregation.

Carolyn Arena, a St. John's parishioner since 1969, recalled how James Rouse, the

original planner of Columbia, purposefully designed the city to be open to anyone. People intentionally moved to Columbia, she said.

“The people who came here had to agree that they wanted to live a life of integration,” she said, “and the mix just worked.”

Arena recently co-authored a compilation of parishioner memories and a history of the Interfaith Center. The book, “Creative Tension,” begins with a quote that explains both its title and the idea behind Columbia and the Interfaith Center.

“A bold new idea of different religious expressions working together where possible and having independent integrity when needed began with the creation of Columbia,” it says. “Primarily Catholics, Jews and Protestants planned to live together in Columbia in creative tension to maximize their respective and collective interests.”

During the Mass, Archbishop Lori reminisced that 40 years ago, as a new priest in Prince George’s county, he heard about St. John and the interfaith community.

“We were all sort of scratching our heads wondering what the heck this was,” he remembered, “and certainly wondering if it would work or not.”

Now 50 years later, Archbishop Lori credits parishioners with making a very unique community flourish.

In those beginning days of Archbishop Lori’s priesthood, there was another aspect of St. John’s community that was beginning to take root. In 1977, the now-thriving Hispanic community was just a vision. That year, current parishioner, Laurentina Moreno Takovich was among a group of Hispanics who requested a Spanish Mass in the Columbia area.

“We are very blessed to have the Spanish Mass for the people who have just arrived in this country and are not bilingual,” he said.

What began as a once-per-month Mass with 30 people has blossomed to 1,400 people across three Masses each weekend. The parish maintains five Spanish-language choirs, along with prayer and charismatic groups and a youth group.

Cristina Rodriguez, Hispanic youth coordinator, said the group formed out of a need to get teens more active in the parish and their community.

“They discover they have a lot of skills and things to give to others,” she said.

The teens assist at Mass the third Saturday of each month, and are also involved in service projects for their community. The group serves meals bi-monthly at St. Vincente De Paul of Baltimore’s Beans and Bread in Fells Point. Each month they spend time with the elderly at the Little Sisters of the Poor’s St. Martin’s Home for the Aged in Catonsville, and on Sept. 23 the teens are helping with a carwash. Rodriguez reminds the teens that it is about more than just service.

“We do this because we love Jesus,” she said.

Takovich said the bilingual anniversary Mass was great because it brought Hispanics, Asians, whites and Africans together.

“We are all daughters and sons, children, of Jesus under the same roof,” she said.

Father Bowen said diversity is evident when one looks at the faces in the congregation.

“When they come in line to receive Communion,” he said, “you feel in your gut that this is what it means to be the body of Christ. The people of God on pilgrimage to the Father.”

Father Bowen reminded parishioners that it is not the building that makes their parish community special.

“We know that we’ve never been a parish that was brick and mortar. We’ve always been a church of the people of God.”

With that in mind, Father Bowen announced that St. John’s will now be a sister-parish of St. Bernadine’s parish in West Baltimore. The parishes have pledged to mutually evangelize their cities and strengthen their parish communities.