

Holy Childhood Association fosters classroom missionaries

Anyone growing up in the Catholic Church through the 1960s might remember the term “pagan baby,” based on a parish/school program through which parishioners and students spiritually adopted babies from foreign countries to pray for them.

That was Holy Childhood Association (HCA), in existence for 165 years through the archdiocese, and one way coordinator Kelly Hellmuth leads in to her spiel when trying to attract participants to this important mission work among elementary school children.

“People get a kick out of that,” she said. “ ‘I remember!’ they say.”

But not only grownups are called to live out their faith, said Ms. Hellmuth; children also are called to help brothers and sisters around the world.

Through four focal HCA programs, an international association with a national office in New York, children are asked to practice three components while learning about Third World countries: daily prayer for other children, spiritual sacrifices and financial sacrifices.

“I tell kids they can say a Hail Mary faster than they can brush their teeth,” said Ms. Hellmuth. When they give up something, for instance chocolate, children are encouraged to do so with a smile, and offer up a prayer to those without it.

Through Advent and Lent collections, a Membership Program and Around the World, Ms. Hellmuth’s job is to hype children to learn about students around the globe and to donate money from their hearts to help ease impoverished lives.

“I don’t just want their extra change,” she said, “I want them to be meaningful in their giving, to understand how the money will help.”

One little boy offered \$5 of his \$10 birthday money, she said. “That was a pretty big sacrifice for a 7-year-old!”

HCA depends on educators to help teach students, including those homeschooled, what it means to be poor, and more importantly, what it means to be poor in America versus Ethiopia. They are taught to become missionaries - from the classroom.

Upcoming Advent collection

Schools and parishes can still sign up for the Advent collection commencing Nov. 30 to help children prepare for Christmas. Students learn how to make the season more meaningful through prayer and sacrifice.

Activities, crafts and prayer services will focus on Peru. Grade-appropriate materials are distributed for a mere \$5 fee which supplies each child with a coin box, each classroom with a poster, and each educator with a reference guide and curriculum.

On board to date are Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Ellicott City; St. Charles Borromeo, Pikesville; St. Brigid, Canton; St. William of York, Baltimore; St. Clare School, Essex; and St. Thomas Aquinas Elementary School, Hampden.

The same program will be available for Lent 2009 (focusing on Bangladesh), and the ongoing Membership Program is focused on Angola. For every \$10 collected, another country is adopted and tracked on a large classroom map. Eight parishes and schools are currently enrolled in the Membership Program.

Ironically, students in Third World countries are participating as missionaries themselves through HCA. Ms. Hellmuth heard the account of one little girl at a Catholic mission who placed her only pair of shoes in the offertory basket; she thought some other child may need them more.

"We want kids to know they are helping kids around the world," said Ms. Hellmuth. "Are they praying for a new Nintendo for Christmas, or for God to help other kids?"

For more information about Holy Childhood Association, e-mail khellmuth@archbalt.org or call 410-625-8450. Visit www.hcakids.org.