

Hundreds flock to pray at public veneration of St. John Vianney's heart

For reasons as diverse as the distances they traveled, nearly 250 Catholics of all ages traveled from as far as Kansas to pray before the first-class relic of St. John Vianney's incorrupt heart at St. Mary's Historic Seminary and Spiritual Center in Baltimore Nov. 10-11.

Baltimore was the first stop of a six-month national relic tour sponsored by the Knights of Columbus. The heart of the 19th century French saint was borrowed from its home in Ars, France.

Among the 30 visitors in the first hour of the viewing were eight Johns Hopkins students, who prayed the rosary together with two priests.

Joining them was a family that traveled from Pennsylvania, including a fourth-degree knight of the Knights of Columbus who had learned of the relic's display earlier that morning.

Later in the afternoon, Fred and Ellen LeGare, parishioners of St. Joseph Parish in Emmitsburg, brought six of their 10 children to pray in the presence of the relic.

"I knew it would be a very powerful way to pray for our priests, especially Archbishop (William E.) Lori," said Ellen LeGare. "We decided to do a family pilgrimage."

Fred LeGare recognized the significance for his children.

“It’s something I want them to experience, to have reverence for the treasures of the church, the relics of the saints,” he said. “St. John Vianney is a very powerful saint. We’ve known about him for a long time, and when we heard about this we wanted to bring everybody and pray.”

The LeGare family prayed the Rosary together before saying personal prayers in front of the relic.

“Before we left home, we asked the kids what intentions they wanted to bring in their pilgrimage,” Ellen LeGare said. “I think each had their own personal intentions, but collectively, we wanted to pray for Archbishop Lori.”

Mary LeGare, 12 years old, prayed for her friend’s father who died a couple of months ago. The oldest sibling in attendance, Joseph, 16, prayed for guidance about following his older brother’s path in attending seminary.

After its display at the Spiritual Center, the relic was moved to a Baltimore hotel to be present for a day of prayer beginning the U.S. Bishops Conference in Baltimore Nov. 12.

Brian Caulfield, communications specialist for the Supreme Council of the Knights of Columbus and vice postulator of the cause for canonization of Venerable Father Michael J. McGivney, embraced the significance of the relic being displayed at St. Mary’s Historic Seminary - the nation’s first Catholic seminary.

Father McGivney, founder of the Knights of Columbus, was a seminarian there from 1873 to 1877 and took his minor orders for the priesthood in the very chapel where the relic was on display.

“This is the original chapel where Father McGivney would have prayed,” he said. “It is very important to us because St. John Vianney is the patron saint of parish priests,

and we see a connection of having custody of his heart for six months connecting back to Father McGivney, who was a parish priest himself.”

Caulfield was inspired to see the faith of many visitors.

“It’s almost like heart to heart, the way I look at it,” he said. “When they kneel down in front, the heart is almost at their level. I think that’s what we’re really looking for. This is a holy saint in heaven, but you can relate to this physical heart to heart, and that’s how I see people relating to St. John Vianney.”

Deacon Vito S. Piazza Sr., director of St. Mary’s Spiritual Center and Historic Site and permanent deacon at St. Joseph in Sykesville, found special meaning in the presence of children at the public veneration.

“It’s wonderful,” he said. “The children are the face of the church right now, and the face of the church of the future. I think it’s important that parents teach their children about reverence.”

Also in attendance were parishioners who chose to remain silent for hours as they prayed before the relic. Others wept.

“That’s the interior life, and to sit in silence in the presence of a first-class relic strengthens the richness of the interior life,” said Deacon Piazza. “Whatever their needs are, they are willing to put their needs in front of God, the sacredness of the relic, where the Holy Spirit is present.”