

Luke mill closure sends prayers, former pastors to Allegany County

Bishop Adam J. Parker and Monsignor James W. Hannon added their presence to prayers for the Tri-Towns community affected by the impending closure of one of Western Maryland's largest employers.

The two joined Father Edward Hendricks for 4 p.m. Mass May 4 at St. Peter in Westernport, where generations of families found their livelihood at the Verso Corp. paper mill, which four days earlier announced that it would close June 30.

The mill is located in Luke, across George's Creek from Westernport in southwestern Allegany County. It sits on the Potomac River, across from the West Virginia town of Piedmont, where Margie Meyers, the director of mission for Divine Mercy Parish, which includes St. Peter, was raised.

"My Dad (Jack Meyers) retired from the mill in 2004," Meyers said. "He worked there for most of his adult life. He walked across the (Potomac) river to get to work."

The plant employs 675 people. Meyers' father worked as a maintenance supervisor when that department alone, she said, had approximately 500 employees.

"Westvaco (the previous owner) was always a place where young people not interested in college could find a stable career," she said. "It's a company town. The plant supported the Little League, and provided good health care. ... It paid for my college and Catholic education."

Meyers went to the former parish school at St. Peter and then Bishop Walsh in Cumberland. She earned degrees at La Salle University in Philadelphia and Gonzaga

University in Spokane, Wash. After serving eight years in faith formation at a parish in State College, Pa., she returned to Allegany County in July 2018.

Father Hendricks is the pastor of Divine Mercy Parish, which is based at St. Michael in Frostburg and, in addition to St. Peter in Westernport, includes St. Ann in Grantsville, St. Gabriel in Barton and St. Joseph in Midland. Its staff includes Deacon Harold Bradley, another retiree of the paper mill.

Father Hendricks was on a pastoral retreat when news of the closure came. Having spent 33 of his 42 years as a priest of the Archdiocese of Baltimore in Allegany County, he was shaken by the news.

“Shock is the operative word for what we’re dealing with,” Father Hendricks said. “It happened so suddenly. The mayors of Westernport and Luke found out on radio news. No one was prepared for this.”

Within 24 hours, the leadership of the archdiocese, in the form of Bishop Parker and Monsignor Hannon, added their voices to his response.

“I would have been surprised if they hadn’t called,” Father Hendricks said. “They were able to change their schedules to be with us, and for that, we’re very grateful.”

Bishop Parker served St. Peter and several other area parishes from 2001 to 2005. Monsignor Hannon, the Western Vicar, led it and multiple parishes in the region that became Divine Mercy Parish in 2016. When either of them spend a night or two in Western Maryland, it’s most likely at the St. Peter rectory.

St. Peter Church predates not just the 1888 founding of the paper mill, but the Civil War, as it was established in 1857.

Bishop Parker presided at the Saturday Mass, while Monsignor Hannon offered the

homily.

“As you know, we both love this area,” the monsignor said. “We lived here, we care deeply for all of you - our own ministry as priests was uniquely shaped by our time here at St. Peter’s and in this Mountain Maryland area. We return here often because Westernport is home to us and you have always been so welcoming to us.

“We are grateful to Father Ed for always emphasizing to us how welcome we are here. Whenever we see you in our own comings and goings, you always offer us a warm welcome. That has been a blessing to us over all these years. We want you to know that we hold you in our hearts.”

Meyers said that the Mass had approximately 150 worshippers, three times its normal attendance.

“They decided they needed to be here,” Meyers said of the bishop and monsignor. “I can’t tell you what it meant to the people. There are no answers. They can’t fix it, but they were able to reassure us of God’s providence. Bishop Adam waited after Mass to greet everyone.”

That included renewing acquaintances with paper mill retirees such as Linda Lee, and current employees, such as Karen and Will Schaeffer, who were married by Father Hendricks in 1980 at St. Peter, his first assignment after his ordination.

“They’re a great family, I’ve known them forever,” Father Hendricks said. “I don’t know what they’re going to do at this point. ... The workers and their families were blindsided by this.”

Monsignor Hannon spoke to that uncertainty.

“Holding on to our faith is important at a time like this,” he said in his homily. “For

some of you, the future may feel unknown and uncertain. No doubt there is anxiety and fear for some. There are many questions that are as of yet unanswered. But our faith is a constant. It is a rock when things seem uncertain.”

Father Hendricks was asked if there was anything people in the archdiocese could do for the Tri-Towns.

“Ask people to pray for the region,” he said.

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