

Mark Pacione, ‘giant’ in youth ministry, dies at 60

Mark D. Pacione, a nationally respected leader in youth and young adult ministry who devoted decades of service to his native Archdiocese of Baltimore, died suddenly Dec. 29. He was 60.

Noted for helping organize World Youth Day in Denver in 1993 and the papal visit to Baltimore in 1995, Pacione was regarded as a pioneer in finding innovative ways of encouraging youths to deepen their faith.

Pacione helped develop the archdiocesan division of youth and young adult ministry, which he led from the mid-1980s until 2009 when Cardinal Edwin F. O’Brien appointed him associate director of schools planning for the archdiocese. Pacione later served as associate director of the archdiocese’s office of research and planning. He was also currently serving on the Board of Directors for the Catholic Youth Foundation USA (CYFUSA).

“Young people are the church now,” Pacione said in a 2000 interview with the Catholic Review, “not for some future moment. If we don’t give them respect now, they are less likely to be here in the future.”

In a Dec. 29 message to Catholic Center employees, priests and pastoral life directors, Archbishop William E. Lori said a hallmark of Pacione’s ministry was “helping young people grow in their love of Jesus Christ and his church.”

“But it was Mark’s persistent optimism, friendly nature and unwavering goodness that most will remember about him,” Archbishop Lori said. “Mark’s death is a tremendous loss for our entire family of faith and we will miss him greatly.”

Marc Parisi, communications director at Calvert Hall College High School in Towson and the school's former director of campus ministry, said Pacione inspired him and many others to get involved in youth ministry.

"He was a tremendous mentor to so many," said Parisi, describing his friend as a "giant" in youth ministry. "He always said that young people gave him hope."

Parisi recalled attending World Youth Day in Rome in the summer of 2000 with a large group of other teens from across the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Temperatures soared on the day of a papal Mass, he said, and members of his group were "dropping left and right" as they walked 10 miles to the site of the liturgy.

"It was a million degrees," Parisi said, "and Mark was carrying people (who fainted). He was also on the phone trying to make sure everyone was taken care of. That was always Mark - caring for others."

Kellie Reynolds, coordinator of youth and young adult ministry at St. Stephen in Bradshaw, said Pacione was willing to do anything to support young people, even if it meant wearing a silly costume or doing some fun activity at one of the many youth events he organized. He often played his guitar and harmonica for teens, and sang songs such as "Hush, Hush, Somebody's Calling My Name."

"He could take a room of 500 teens who just had a three-hour dance and were filled with high energy, and he could bring them to a moment of peace and reverence by just singing a song," Reynolds said. "He had an ability to lead people into moments of joy and moments of peace and prayer like nobody we've ever seen."

Pacione gave Reynolds a button, she said, with a phrase he often repeated: "Celebrate the ordinary." It was how he lived his life, she said.

Wilmington Bishop W. Francis Malooly, former auxiliary bishop of Baltimore, knew

Pacione when Bishop Malooly was a young associate pastor at Pacione's home parish of St. Anthony of Padua in Hamilton. The bishop, a former director of the O'Dwyer Youth Retreat House in Sparks, later worked with Pacione in youth ministry.

"He had a very consistent, gentle way about him," Bishop Malooly said. "He wasn't rattled. He came from a very strong faith family and always had a deep love for the church."

Bishop Malooly noted that Pacione was a driving force behind the annual Youth and Young Adult Pilgrimage held during Holy Week in Baltimore. The pilgrimage has been duplicated in other dioceses across the country, including Wilmington.

Pacione promoted other successful activities such as the biennial Baltimore Youth Catholic Conference, the High School Leadership Institute and retreat programs.

In a 2008 interview with the Catholic Review, Pacione said "rescue" is what the church is all about. During that year's Baltimore Youth Catholic Conference in Ocean City, the song "Rescue Me" was sung by attendees during a candlelight procession.

"We're an evangelizing church," Pacione said. "We get out there and proclaim the word of God. We carry the word of God in our hands and our feet. We try to rescue the world and bring it to some kind of healing."

Although youth ministry was his first love, Pacione was willing to serve his church in whatever way he could. When he began working on schools planning, he did so with "great passion," according to Monsignor Robert Hartnett, director of the archdiocesan office of research and planning and pastor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Essex.

“He put all of his energy into it,” Monsignor Hartnett said, noting that Pacione was determined to make sure leaders had all the information they needed as they developed a plan for strengthening the Catholic school system.

The closure and consolidation of 13 schools in 2010 “weighed heavily” on Pacione, Monsignor Hartnett said.

“He was an advocate for many of the communities based on the information and demographics we had,” said Monsignor Hartnett.

Pacione worked hard to reach out to those impacted by the closures, Monsignor Hartnett said, “to “give them the opportunity to speak their piece and say what they needed to say.”

Monsignor Hartnett said he was always impressed that throughout Pacione’s work with young people, he was very tolerant of different expressions of spirituality.

“He was never the kind of person who would dismiss someone for their spiritual practices,” he said. “He accepted people and worked with them.”

Pacione attended his parish school at St. Anthony, Calvert Hall, what is now Loyola University Maryland in Baltimore and The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

Before working at the Catholic Center, he was a teacher at St. Anthony School; a teacher and youth minister at St. Margaret School in Bel Air; coordinator of youth ministry and director of religious education at St. Margaret Parish. He also taught at schools in the Diocese of Arlington, Va.

Pacione, who served on the board of the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, is survived by his wife, Carol J. Wagner Pacione (pastoral life director of St.

Pius X in Rodgers Forge); daughter, Elizabeth E. Rausch and husband, Ian, of Boston; mother, Mary Louise (Cellitto) Pacione-Schulmeyer; brothers, Jeffrey D. Pacione and wife, Sharon, of Wenham, Mass., and Christopher D. Pacione and wife, Jennifer, of Pittsburgh; and many nieces and nephews. He was predeceased by his father, Primo Angelo Pacione, and his sister, Anita M. Tebbutt-Evetts.

Visitation will take place Jan. 2 from 1 to 9 p.m. at St. Pius. A 10 a.m. funeral Mass will be offered Jan. 3 at St. Margaret in Bel Air.

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