

Maryvale joins other Catholic schools in honoring victims of gun violence

LUTHERVILLE - Silently and reverently, students from Maryvale Preparatory School pressed red flags into the ground outside their school as the names of victims of last month's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Fla., were read during a March 14 prayer service.

Seventeen flags represented 17 lost lives in all, but there would be more.

Maryvale students solemnly added hundreds of fluttering flags to the school's Mary Circle for each of the approximately 500 lives lost to school violence since the December 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Conn.

With the support of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, other schools throughout the archdiocese held similar prayer services on the one-month anniversary of the Parkland shooting. The services were held on the same day students in schools across the country staged walkouts to protest gun violence.

James B. Sellinger, chancellor of education for the archdiocese, sent a letter to parents March 9 to inform them that all schools were encouraged to take part in a prayer service.

"To help students of Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Baltimore participate in this effort in a more productive and appropriate way," Sellinger wrote in his letter, "we will be offering our elementary and secondary school students the opportunity to attend a special 17-minute prayer service."

The Department of Education provided a template to guide the leaders of the prayer service, which included recommended songs, readings, reflections and intercessions for the victims of violence, the solace and comfort of victims' families and concern for the mental and spiritual wellbeing of young people. A similar template was offered to the parents for use in prayer at home.

"Every time that there has been a world event or national event ... this community has come together," said Tracey Ford, president. "It's part of being a Catholic school."

"We support our students and their interest in wanting to make their world a better place every day," Ford said.

The theology department at Maryvale, especially Mary Pat Tilghman, its chair, worked with students on the event. Tilghman and the ninth-grade students were on a retreat during the service, but were able to join through FaceTime.

Faculty called the movement primarily "student-driven," and said students from both the middle and high school were involved in its planning. Seniors Peyton Bleach, Paige Connell and Brooke Yanaga were among the student leaders.

"I try to speak up for anyone and everyone whenever I can and especially I try to help others find their voices," Yanaga said. "Unfortunately, these children no longer have voices so we need to rise up with ours."

The students made the decision to hold the service outside, combining the prayer service with a walkout to indicate the need for action.

"Instead of just walking out and standing there," Connell said, "we thought it would be more influential and hard-hitting if we could pray and leave a mark physically, like we did with the flags, to show what we were feeling and thinking."

Yanaga said that the students were inspired, in part, by the conflict that has surrounded the recent tragedy, with many saying that prayers are not enough.

“(Prayers) are needed, but so is action,” Yanaga said. “Rather than just having a prayer service, even though we wanted to send up our prayers, we wanted to show that we are willing to do something more than that.”

“Walking out gave all of us an opportunity to speak up,” Bleach said. “The fact that this could have been us, it just terrifies me. There’s so much that we need to do.”

Maryvale students will have the opportunity to attend the March for Our Lives in Washington, D.C., March 24 to protest gun violence. An alumna sponsored a bus to take students who wish to participate, which Ford said speaks to Maryvale’s motto: “Educating Young Women for Life.”

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