

Millersville parishioner elected national president of Holy Name Society

By George P. Matysek Jr.

gmatysek@CatholicReview.org

At its height, the Holy Name Society boasted more than 40,000 members in 135 parishes in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. More than a half century later, there are now about 500 members in 18 parishes.

Baltimore's declining numbers aren't an aberration.

Across the country, membership has fallen as one of the world's oldest Christian organizations has faced an increasingly secularized society, aging members and other challenges that have made it more difficult to attract newcomers.

Today, there are more than 10,000 Holy Name members in the United States, hailing from 21 active diocesan Holy Name Unions.

During the 41st annual convention of the National Association of the Holy Name Society and the 100th annual convention of the Archdiocese of Baltimore Holy Name Union, both held simultaneously in Baltimore Sept. 21-24, leaders of the venerable organization pledged to embrace social media and new forms of evangelization to attract new members.

The organization's spiritual mission of promoting respect for the names of God and Jesus is needed now more than ever, leaders said, as the wider culture shows increasing disregard for using God's name in vain.

"We are not trying to reinvent the core values of the Holy Name Society - evangelization, promoting the spiritual and corporal works of mercy," said Joseph Lapoint, outgoing president of the National Association of the Holy Name Society

and president of the Archdiocese of Boston's Holy Name Union.

"We are just trying to make ourselves more recognizable," he said. "I think the Holy Name Society is alive and well. I think we have to adapt to the times as far as the way we get our message out - without changing the message."

The National Association of the Holy Name Society has promoted a revamped website -nahns.com - to spread its message. Members have also recently delved into social media, establishing a Facebook page that has more than 3,100 fans and a Twitter account with nearly 100 followers.

"We are getting responses from people in their 20s and 30s who are very much interested in the Holy Name Society," said William Harris Jr., a parishioner of Our Lady of the Fields in Millersville who was elected the new president of the National Association of the Holy Name Society. "It's demonstrated that the interest is there. We have to figure out a way to respond to them and give them some encouragement."

Harris believes every diocese in the United States should have a Holy Name Union. Unions are umbrella associations that provide support to parish Holy Name Societies. As president, he plans to travel the country to help make that happen. Harris also will make a major push to attract Spanish-speaking members. He hopes to learn what works best in other unions and then promote their best practices nationally.

In Baltimore, the Holy Name Union donates \$1,000 annually to support Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien's discernment suppers. It also annually gives out about \$7,000 in \$500 high school scholarships and about eight \$500 grants to local seminarians. It sponsors a popular "Holy Name night" at Oriole Park at Camden Yards. Parish societies are active in prison ministry, supporting pastors, promoting prolife efforts and other outreach.

In a general session during the Baltimore convention, Mike Gores, president of the Holy Name Union in Minneapolis-St. Paul, emphasized that societies must live up to their missions. If a new member reads about the spiritual undertakings of the Holy Name Society and then visits a local parish and discovers that the members do

nothing but play cards during their meetings, he said, then that new member won't come back.

"You have to deliver on what you promise," Gores said.

During the convention, whose theme was "Service in His Holy Name," a photo presentation showcasing 100 years of Holy Name ministry in Baltimore was featured.

Blessed John of Vercelli formed the Holy Name Society in 1274 at the request of Pope Gregory X. Its mission was to promote the Holy Name and combat a heresy of the time that held that Jesus was not divine. Pope Pius IV formally established the Confraternity of the Holy Name in 1564. Father Charles H. McKenna first established the society in North America in 1896, with permission from Pope Leo XIII.

"We believe the Holy Name Society is a mechanism to increase the spirituality and the faith in individual members," said Ron Schmitz, a past president of the Holy Name Union in Minneapolis-St. Paul. "There's many ways to do that, but this is one that has a long history in the church and is overlaid with Dominican spirituality. It brings a unique variation of how to form people in the faith and then put that faith into action."

Dominican Father Reynaldo Adalid, national director of the Holy Name Society in the Philippines, said the Holy Name pledge taken by members is an invaluable reminder of what's truly important in life.

"The pledge is asking us to have loyalty to Christ and the church and to live out our Christian faith - especially in this world where people have become ashamed to be identified as Catholics or as Christians," Father Adalid said. "Its value is still very timely and something that's needed."