

Mount Carmel is bedrock of Essex community

When Monsignor Robert L. Hartnett arrived at Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Essex 12 years ago, the neighborhood parish was trying to hold together a surrounding community undergoing great change.

Older parishioners were moving away. Nearby apartment complexes, some of which have since been leveled, were havens for crime.

“There was a lot of police activity when I arrived here,” Monsignor Hartnett remembered.

Our Lady of Mount Carmel stood as an anchor in the community during those tough times and now is enjoying the renaissance that Baltimore County has promoted along a waterfront that has parishioners and other residents minutes from the Chesapeake Bay.

Using the full power of its 2,500 registered families, Our Lady of Mount Carmel has been a leader in addressing the needs of the less fortunate in its community.

“The Gospel really provides the direction and tells us to help the less fortunate,” Monsignor Harnett said of the parish’s outreach efforts.

Whereas the parish once hosted needy families for Thanksgiving dinner, parishioners now deliver feasts to shut-ins. The change has been a success, as the elderly and sick are given several days worth of food.

The destitute routinely knock on the parish’s doors, knowing Our Lady of Mount

Carmel has always responded with kindness.

Our Lady of Mount Carmel also provides drop-off baskets where parishioners can make donations of perishables to the Eastern Interfaith Outreach, which combines the goodwill of 15 churches in the area to provide food for those struggling financially.

That outreach underscores the lessons being learned in a rare parish, one that provides K-12 education.

Our Lady of Mount Carmel is not unique in having an elementary school, but it is one of just three parishes in the archdiocese operating a high school, the others being St. Mary in Annapolis and Immaculate Conception, which runs Towson Catholic High School.

“We’re often one and the same,” said Kathleen Sipes, the principal of Our Lady of Mount Carmel High School, of the synergy between church and schools.

Our Lady of Mount Carmel’s sense of service extends to all students.

The high school offers 118 different opportunities for service, including local shelters and sponsoring families for Christmas. A recent leadership retreat for 45 students helped foster a responsibility to the school and the church.

“There’s something for everybody,” Ms. Sipes said. “We want young people to become people for others. There’s a huge emphasis on service.”

The high school’s 260 students reflect the working-class ethic that defines Essex, Monsignor Harnett added.

The elementary school’s entry made Our Lady of Mount Carmel the only parish entity in Catholic Charities’ Dragon Boat Races Sept. 13. Father John Rapisarda,

who was ordained this summer and joined the parish as an associate pastor, manned an oar in the event, which benefitted Catholic Charities.

Father Rapisarda recently started an Emmaus group for young adults at the parish.

Our Lady of Mount Carmel also serves as a training parish for seminarians from St. Mary's Seminary and University, Roland Park. Five new seminarians - James Ebert, Matthew Strickenberger, Jonathan Hoffman, Jason Feigh and Patrick Wiler - arrived in September, assisting with weekend Masses.

Monsignor Harnett, who was raised 10 minutes away in Overlea, said that Our Lady of Mount Carmel seems like home after all these years.

"These are my people," he said. "I'm not any better or less than them. I walk with them in the spiritual journey. Sometimes I lead, and sometimes I learn and follow."