

On fire for the faith



Chief James S. Clack

When Baltimore City Fire Chief James S. Clack first came to Charm City more than two years ago, I had a chance to profile him for The Catholic Review. Toward the end of the interview, I asked the Catholic fire chief if he had a devotion to [St. Florian](#), patron saint of firefighters.

The tall and lanky Minnesota native smiled politely, unbuttoned his right shirt pocket and pulled out a holy card emblazoned with the Roman saint's image.

"Absolutely," he said.

St. Florian must have been looking out for Chief Clack last week.

In less than 24 hours, the city department head and his firefighters battled back-to-back five-alarm fires - one on The Block and another in historic Mount Vernon.

Exactly one week after those huge blazes — both squelched without any loss of life — Chief Clack will address Catholic young adults about fire of a different sort.

Speaking at the [Greene Turtle](#) in Fells Point Dec. 14 at 7:30 p.m. as part of the [Tap into Your Faith](#) series, Chief Clack will talk about his own journey into the Catholic faith, his work in emergency services and his role as a deacon at Sacred Heart of Jesus in Highlandtown.

Below is a sneak peek from the 2008 Catholic Review profile:



Chris Krueger of Peter J. O'Connor Fire Station on Fort Avenue presents Baltimore City Fire Chief James Clack with an Orioles hat in 2008. (CR Staff/Owen Sweeney III)

After arriving on the scene of last year's I-35W bridge collapse, then Minneapolis Fire Chief James Clack had a hard time believing it was real.

Peering down on the frenzied scene from a neighboring bridge overlooking the Mississippi River, the tall and lanky veteran firefighter was stunned that a quarter-mile stretch of bridge had been reduced to jumbled piles of rubble.

Flames engulfed some cars. Mangled steel, concrete and rebar jutted from the murky water. At least 50 vehicles carrying dozens of rush-hour commuters were plunged 60 feet into the swiftly flowing river.

"It was almost like a Hollywood movie set," remembered Chief Clack, now the newly appointed chief of the Baltimore City Fire Department who began his position in April and was sworn in at City Hall May 14.

"It was the most incredible thing I'd ever seen in my career," he said. "There were tremendous opportunities for people to get hurt trying to help others."

As the unified incident commander overseeing rescue operations, Chief Clack was in charge of making sure hundreds of agencies worked together.

By paying attention to safety and maintaining a steady hand in his management of the disaster, Chief Clack won a lot of credit for preventing a dire situation from getting worse. Thirteen people died and about 100 were wounded in the collapse - far fewer than had been initially expected.

With Baltimore's fire department still reeling from last year's death of a cadet in a training exercise and other incidents concerning safety, many are looking to the new chief to demonstrate the same confident leadership he showed in Minneapolis.

In an interview with The Catholic Review, Chief Clack said he knows what the expectations are. He pledged to make safety his number one priority and promised to find ways to increase diversity in the department and to address other concerns.

A convert to the Catholic faith and a permanent deacon ordained for the Diocese of St. Cloud, Minn., the 47-year-old chief believes his faith will help him meet his new challenges in Baltimore.

Journey of faith

Although born in the far reaches of northwestern Minnesota, Chief Clack spent his childhood and teen years in California where his family relocated soon after his birth.

His father operated a 160-acre plum farm near Fresno and sold heavy construction equipment. His mother had been a basketball player on an all-women's team modeled on the Harlem Globetrotters. She toured Minnesota in the 1940s playing professional men's teams.

Sitting in his modest office in the unassuming mezzanine of the Baltimore City Fire Department headquarters near City Hall, Chief Clack credited his parents for quite suddenly laying the groundwork for his faith development when he was 12.

It happened one day at the kitchen table, where he and his four younger siblings were eating fried chicken and, as usual, he said, "raising hell."

His fallen-away Lutheran mother turned to his agnostic father and announced that it was time to “get these kids into church,” Chief Clack recalled.

Since his father had grown up in Utah, he knew Mormons had strong youth programs. So, after some lessons in the faith from Mormon missionaries, the Clack children and their mother were baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

With the genes of a basketball player firmly imbedded in his 6-foot-6-inch frame, Chief Clack went on to play basketball for the University of Minnesota, Crookston, an NCAA Division II institution. It was there that he started attending Mass with his Catholic roommate rather than drive 100 miles to the nearest Mormon temple.

The future fire chief said he fell in love with the Catholic Church, attracted by the richness of the liturgy and the solid structure of the church. There was a sense of authenticity he longed for, he said.

After completing Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and joining the Catholic Church while still in college, Chief Clack married Rose Marie, his Catholic sweetheart, in 1981. He slowly became more active in his parish, lecturing and serving as an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion. Chief Clack went through several years of diaconal formation before his 2004 ordination.

In his 22 years in the Minneapolis Fire Department, Chief Clack often depended on his Catholic faith to get him through stresses on the job. He has delivered babies and held the hands of dying people.

“It’s really a grace to be allowed to be at those things,” said Chief Clack. “You see the whole scope of life from beginning to end and everything in between.”

Read the full story [here](#).