

Parishes, parishioners across Baltimore Archdiocese join day of prayer and fasting for reparation in abuse crisis

At least 33 parishes responded to Archbishop William E. Lori's call to prayer and repentance for the healing of victims of sexual abuse and the healing of the church. The archbishop called for Masses and fasting Sept. 7 as a day of reparation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

In addition to Masses celebrated on the feast of the Sacred Heart, parishes opened their doors for eucharistic adoration, rosaries, Chaplets of the Divine Mercy, prayer services and open forums for parishioners to ask question and comment on the crisis.

The Review was on hand to witness some of those observances.

Randallstown

At Holy Family Parish in Randallstown, a day of eucharistic adoration Sept. 6 was followed by an evening open forum attended by about 40 people. At a similar session after morning Mass Sept. 7, 11 parishioners shared concerns with Father Raymond Harris, pastor.

At the second open forum, Father Harris began with a prayer for victims of abuse and shared a timeline of events over the summer that brought the crisis again to national and international attention, including disclosures that Archbishop Theodore McCarrick, former archbishop of Washington, had been accused of molesting minors and having inappropriate relationships with adults, especially in his years as a seminary rector.

In mid-August, a Pennsylvania grand jury report of an investigation that covered 70 years of diocesan records revealed that more than 300 priests had abused more than

1,000 minors over 70 years in six dioceses in the state.

The pastor also cited a letter from Pope Francis to all the church, which recognized the global scope of the scandal.

“People are not happy with just words,” Father Harris said. “They want actions.”

He noted that Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has asked for an investigation by the Vatican into how Archbishop McCarrick could have risen through clerical ranks when there had been rumors of his behavior in the past.

He said Cardinal DiNardo pledged that the U.S. bishops will take action to create processes to make bishops more accountable for their actions when the bishops meet for their annual fall meeting in Baltimore in November.

“To do penance is well and good – and that’s what we do today in reparation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus – but concrete actions are needed,” Father Harris told the small group gathered at Holy Family.

He said Archbishop Lori and his auxiliary bishops are reaching out and using the time before the bishops’ November meeting to listen to people, noting that he and the chairpersons of the parish council and finance council would bring the concerns of the parishioners to a listening session with the bishops later this month.

Questions and concerns from those at the forum encompassed Pope Francis’ response to allegations from former apostolic nuncio Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò that Pope Benedict and Pope Francis were aware of allegations against Archbishop McCarrick years ago.

Father Harris said the parish is in communion with the pope and respectful of Pope Francis, but that it is not disrespectful to ask for answers to important questions

Parishioners were concerned about victims and others affected by the scandal leaving the church. Others asked about background checks for clergy and were pleased to learn that all clergy, seminarians and religious, as well as lay employees and volunteers with significant contact with minors, undergo background checks

and safe environment training.

Carolyn Strauss, a parishioner of Holy Family since her days in its parish grade school in 1954, said she attended the open forum to get a better understanding of how the church is handling the abuse situation.

"I'm fortunate to have a parish priest who has kept us advised," she told the Review.

Baltimore Basilica

At the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Archbishop Lori celebrated the mid-day Mass in Reparation to the Sacred Heart, noting that many parishes were joining in the day of prayer and fasting.

"It is a day when we come before the Lord with humble and contrite hearts, seeking God's forgiveness first for our own sins and failings but also seeking God's forgiveness and healing for the appalling sin of sexual abuse perpetrated over and over again by clerics and other representatives of the church," the archbishop said in his homily. "It is a day when we acknowledge as well how bishops and other church authorities covered up those sins, inflicting further pain on those who had already been victimized and undermining the credibility of the church."

He acknowledged that no one is capable on their own of making amends for sin, without the help of God. "If that is true in the normal course of life, how utterly true is it in the present time of the church's life when we are confronted with a tsunami of abuse and perversion: the abuse of young and innocent people, the abuse of power, the abuse of trust. And even if these grave sins were committed decades ago, many victims continue to bear the terrifying scars of these sins and the church herself continues to be deeply scarred and wounded by them," he said.

He said the prayer and fasting of the day of reparation and in days to come would not make amends in and of themselves for the "unspeakable crimes committed against the young, for only with the Lord are found forgiveness and healing."

He added that the church is rightly resolved to do everything possible to prevent abuse in the future and that people rightly demand answers to troubling questions

about past conduct and future accountability of bishops.

Reflecting on the first reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, he asked the congregation to pray that bishops and priests be worthy stewards of the mysteries of salvation.

The archbishop was also scheduled to celebrate the early evening Mass at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Homeland, where he anticipated preaching on the same themes.

After the basilica Mass, Bill Surine stopped to thank the archbishop for his words about the crisis. Surine told the Review that sexual abuse in the church is a great scandal that calls us to "try to repent and go to the Lord."

The parishioner of Ss. Philip and James in Baltimore added that, as he told the archbishop, "The gates of hell will not prevail against the church."

Catholic Center

At the Catholic Center across the street from the basilica Sept. 7, Jen Ayres prayed the rosary on her lunch hour, as she had done for seven days already, beginning in late August.

Ayres, a parishioner of Church of the Nativity in Timonium who works downtown, realized on one of her many walks at lunchtime that she was close to the archdiocesan offices.

"I felt called, with everything going on, to be intentional in my prayer," she said. "The archdiocese needed prayers."

She prayed in front of the Catholic Center and intends to continue every day as her work schedule permits.

She said her prayer has many focuses: for the victims and their healing and protection; for the bishops and their leadership; for all those in the church to find trust in their leaders; and for anyone involved in abuse to do what's right.

She uses a smartphone app to say the prayers and contemplate on the mysteries of

the rosary, but also still follows along on the beads of her rosary, for the physical connection.

She added that praying for the archdiocese in this way was a response to a call, although she's not sure what she hopes to accomplish. "Prayer is about asking and then listening to God. I'm praying, and hopefully I'll hear something," she said.

Westminster

The Day of Reparation coincided with the opening Mass of the school year at St. John School in Westminster, where the pastoral leadership team, via bulletin and Flocknote messages to the community, detailed measures the parish is taking to protect children, and the steps it will take to promote spiritual healing.

"It's not just about rules and procedures and process," Father Mark Bialek, pastor, said. "As many have said, first and foremost it's spiritual, and so being able to bring the presence of Christ to our people in a time of need is paramount."

That included the parish leadership team, which includes Father Andrew DeFusco, associate pastor; Rick Grinstead, director of youth and young adult ministry; Jordan Tippet, director of religious education; and JoMarie Tolj, school principal; jointly praying and determining how to increase its response while continuing its mission. It has added the St. Michael prayer and intentions for those suffering from the sexual abuse crisis to Mass, and a 40-hour devotion for purification and healing.

The opening Mass for the school year included a eucharistic procession, in which Father Bialek and Father DeFusco blessed the school building. A second procession Sept. 8 was to take the eucharist around the rest of the St. John campus.

"It's all about shedding light into every possible corner of our campus," Tippet said. "It restores morality, I think, and it is the essence of truth and hope, which is what we know the church needs."

The first procession, during the height of the school day, wound through a silently reverent school. The only sound emitted from the PA system, where songs of prayer played throughout the classrooms, which housed pre-K students who followed their teacher in making the sign of the cross, to middle-schoolers who knelt in unison

when the monstrance entered their classroom.

"It's an opportunity to ask Him to bless and renew St. John as we strive for holiness," Father Bialek said. "The only one who can truly heal and restore is the Lord and so if we truly believe that Jesus is present – body, blood, soul and divinity – in the Eucharist, then we want to be able to bring our eucharistic Lord to every aspect of parish and school life."

"Our Catholic identity is strong," Tolj added. "If we do not have our Catholic identity, we are not a Catholic school, and that is why we're here."

The parish leadership team said that the procession and the other actions are only the beginning of what they intend to do throughout the year.

"A lot of people are hurt ... angry ... disillusioned ... confused," Father Bialek said. "It's our responsibility as leaders to be able to direct those emotions in a positive way. Although this is a dark period and time for the church, it's also an opportunity for renewal."

Father DeFusco stressed the need for the faithful to remind each other of every person's importance to the church.

"(A) lay person is as Catholic as the pope, and we need to focus on holiness and sainthood," he said. "We are the church, not just spectators."

Poplar Springs

At daily Mass at St. Michael in Poplar Springs, Father Michael Ruane likened the crisis to a ship in rough waters. Catholics, he said, must pull at the oars alongside Christ.

In addition to their usual first Friday devotions of adoration, Father Ruane invited his congregation to a special rosary service that evening.

"A lot of parishioners feel like (prayer) is the least they can do," he said. "(It's) something very immediate and concrete."

The Day of Reparation came two days after Father Ruane attended a

listening session for Western and Central region parish leaders at St. Katharine Drexel in Frederick. His pastoral council determined that a parish-level listening session would be beneficial, one that he said the parish would offer in the coming weeks.

Christopher Gunty and Emily Rosenthal contributed to this article.