

More prayers for peace as Baltimore marks deadly milestone

Archbishop William E. Lori and Mayor Catherine Pugh were among those pausing to pray for peace and consoling the families of victims as the deadliest year in the history of Baltimore City neared an end.

The archbishop was among the faith leaders joining a Dec. 28 vigil called for by Pugh. It was held the day after the city reported its homicide count for 2017 at 343 victims. That surpasses the total recorded this year in New York City, which has more than 13 times the population.

At nearly 56 murders per 100,000 people, it's Baltimore's deadliest year per capita.

The event was held inside the War Memorial building, which was constructed in the aftermath of World War I, which began a century ago. Then, young men in uniform died in Europe. Today, an opioid epidemic has both members of gangs and innocents dropping in droves.

"The numbers scare the hell out of me," said Ray Kelly, who serves on the executive committee at St. Peter Claver Parish in West Baltimore and is co-director of the No Boundaries Coalition, a resident-led organization seeking to unify the community.

"We need a war on addiction, with the same resources and funding that we've had in wars on drugs and crime. We've got to take fuel from the beast that is fentanyl (a synthetic opioid). Addiction feeds crime at the street level. Too many guys are killing each other over a small amount of money."

Kelly joined a crowd that included Christians, Jews and Muslims, and numbered approximately 1,000. It included Tish Griffin, a Department of Transportation employee who went to All Saints School and then Archbishop Keough High School, and sent her son, Kellen, to Cardinal Shehan School and Archbishop Curley High School.

"I'm here to pray for peace," said Griffin, a West Baltimore resident.

Organizers distributed signs with positive messages, such as “healthy” and “joy.” Others raised homemade signs with a number, signifying where a loved one fell in the death count.

The city’s victims included Alex Wroblewski, a popular Federal Hill bartender and graduate of Mount St. Joseph High School, who

was gunned down outside a convenience store in November, and Victorious Swift, a 19-year-old architecture student who was murdered near Mondawmin Mall last March.

Swift’s mother, Victoria, was consoled after the prayer vigil by Archbishop Lori. The archbishop was the first faith leader to speak during the interfaith program.

“We think of so many people whose lives are tragically ended in violence,” he prayed. “We think of those who search, seemingly in vain, for justice. We think of those whose lives are disrupted by drugs and captivated by gangs. We think of families that have been torn apart and immigrants who are in fear.

“And, yes, Lord, we think of those who lack educational opportunities, housing, employment, job skills, and those who call the streets of this city their home. Father, forgive our indifference to these very real and human tragedies. Forgive our longstanding inability to address deep and systemic problems that beset so many residents of our city.”

The Archdiocese of Baltimore’s efforts for peace include regular walks led by Bishop Denis J. Madden. The next is scheduled for Jan. 15, noon on Martin Luther King Day, at St. Bernardine Parish. Its annual peace walk on that day honors its former pastor, the late Monsignor Edward M. Miller.

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