

St. Casimir to lead Father Kolbe School

Father Kolbe School in Canton has always had a strong affiliation with neighboring St. Casimir Church, and beginning with the 2008-09 school year, the two will become even closer as St. Casimir assumes leadership of the 186-student pre-K-8 school.

Although the decision represents a major financial and spiritual undertaking for the 650-family faith community, pastor Father Ross M. Syracuse, O.F.M., Conv., said the parish is embracing the opportunity.

"We're kind of the risk takers when it comes to the idea of welcoming," said Father Syracuse, who announced the decision to parishioners in March. "But not a blind risk. We spent a lot of time talking about it. It's not something out of the blue."

According to Dr. Ronald J. Valenti, superintendent for Catholic Schools for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the decision to have Father Kolbe become a parish-run school was a combined effort.

"The archdiocese knew the school had a presence in this community, so the archdiocese approached the parish and asked them to at least give thought to the possibility of it becoming a parish school, but we understood in that overture that it would ultimately be the decision of the parish and its leadership," Dr. Valenti said.

He said the decision was made after much deliberation and prayerful discernment with parish leadership and Father Syracuse.

"The parish is already going through a transition, which is well thought out and well organized," said Dr. Valenti. "I think they have their act together very well and that's a compliment to the pastor to fulfill the process and a kudos to the parish staff and leadership."

The major difference with the new decision will be in governance. Currently the school's staff reports directly to the Division of Catholic Schools. After the switch, Father Syracuse will direct the school.

Father Kolbe Interparochial School was formed in 1975, when three Baltimore schools, St. Casimir, St. Stanislaus and St. Leo merged, said Father Syracuse. The upper grades of the school were located at St. Casimir, while the lower grades attended class at St. Stanislaus.

In 1997, the archdiocese created the Southeast Baltimore Catholic Academy (SEBCA) –a consortium of six schools, including Father Kolbe, meant to stabilize Catholic education in the areas surrounding Fells Point, Canton and Highlandtown. When the consortium disbanded some four years ago, the Archdiocese of Baltimore “assumed running of the school from an archdiocesan level,” according to Dr. Valenti.

Bernadette Vece, pastoral assistant at St. Casimir and a 1968-graduate of St. Casimir, said she thinks making Father Kolbe a parish school was “a good move for the parish, the school and the area.”

“It’s nice to have it back,” she said.

Elizabeth Phelan, Father Kolbe’s principal for the past five years, said she thinks it benefits both a school and a parish when the two are intermingled.

“Philosophically, that’s how an elementary school should be. We’ve always been partners with the parish as far as liturgical celebrations and liturgies,” said Mrs. Phelan. “This formalizes it.”

As part of the process, the parish will firm up the development program, recruit students, and market the school, said Father Syracuse. A school committee advisory board will be formed and a name change is pending.

Father Syracuse lauded the parish’s finance committee and pastoral council members for their efforts.

The pastor said this move keeps with St. Casimir’s vision and “where we’ve been trying to direct ourselves. It’s important to have a school with a very strong Catholic identity.”

In his 10-year tenure, Father Syracuse said the school, which is located across the street from the church, has been ‘unofficially’ treated as a parish school.

“We’ve spent an awful lot of time with the school,” he said, noting that he has a good rapport with students and regularly celebrates Mass at the school. “The parish is really dedicated to it.”

Jennifer Williams contributed to this story.