

Unity makes Knights' coats go farther

Charity and Unity, the first two principles that guide the Knights of Columbus, were on display in equal measure at St. Ambrose in Park Heights Dec. 8.

The occasion was the fraternal organization's fourth annual "Coats for Kids" outreach in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Approximately 1,000 winter coats were distributed, underscoring the ties between the Maryland State Council and the organization's national office in New Haven, Conn.

The state council paid for the coats, but ordered them through the national office, which had them shipped from a factory directly to the church in northwest Baltimore in late November - all at a discounted price.

"The Knights have a unique and effective organization," said Archbishop William E. Lori, their supreme chaplain. "Together, more can be done. The unity between the local parts of the organization and the national part allows us to accomplish so much charity on an annual basis."

According to Scott Read, Connecticut-based senior director of Programs and Brand Management for the Knights, they have distributed more than 500,000 coats in the U.S. and Canada since 2009, approximately 107,000 coats this year alone.

The outreach has grown in other ways.

"When it began, we had limited styles and colors, but that's changed," Read said. "We don't want every kid in a (community) wearing the same jacket, so people say 'they got it from the Knights.'"

The national office's support of local councils is reciprocated by the Maryland State Council, which had 250 volunteers offering hospitality in August during the Knights 136th Supreme Convention in Baltimore. That included free ground transportation for dignitaries, some from as far as Dulles International Airport in Virginia, an effort coordinated by Vince Grauso, a parishioner of St. Louis in Clarksville.

Ray Traube, a parishioner of St. Frances de Sales in Abingdon and among the founding members 25 years ago of its Father Maurice J. Wolfe Council, was the local organizer for the Dec. 8 coat outreach.

"The coordination required can be scary," Traube said, "but it's been a good experience, the best experience I've had in a long time."

The event included 1,000 polo shirts and 500 sweaters donated by Flynn O'Hara Uniforms, which outfits Catholic schoolchildren. Overseeing distribution of those items was Camille Brown, associate superintendent for School Leadership and Community Programs. Her helpers included Dr. Donna Hargens, executive director/superintendent of Catholic Schools.

Children from St. Ambrose and St. Bernardine in West Baltimore, as well as the neighborhood, began to enter the gym at the former's parish school as the pastor, Capuchin Franciscan Father Paul Zaborowski, offered 8:30 a.m. Mass on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

"The kingdom is being built in and around us today," he said in his homily. "You know that these children are going to leave warmer than when they arrived. We have to make sure the cry of the poor is heard."

The faithful included Wilhemina Greenidge, a parishioner since moving from her native Grenada to Baltimore in 1980. In tow was one of her grandchildren, Nedra.

"She's a big 7-year-old," Greenidge said as the two headed to the coat distribution. "Her mother is going through some tough times, that's why she's living with me. ... Children are the ones who suffer the most."

The happy chaos in the gym included Archbishop Lori, dust on his overcoat and his trousers from kneeling to fit coats on children. He was asked about his affinity for the event when a toddler tugged on his sleeve.

"This is all the explanation you need," he said. "It's a beautiful thing to see the happiness of the young people receiving the coats. It fulfills a need."

