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Prayer Walks Create a Peaceful Presence in West Baltimore

Last August, Bishop Denis Madden led a prayer walk from St. Ambrose Church through the Park Heights neighborhood in Baltimore City where last month there were two murders, including an unborn baby in the womb of a woman who was shot, but not killed.

“The murders were directly across the street from St. Ambrose,” Madden said. “That really has an effect on the parish. What they showed on TV was the car with broken windows right in front of the church. The Park Heights corridor is a rough area. In a 10-minute walk (from Park Heights through Pimlico to Mount Washington), there is a 17-year life expectancy change. That is horrendous.”

Four years ago, Madden, now the Urban Vicar and Auxiliary Bishop Emeritus of the Baltimore Archdiocese, began leading monthly prayer walks in the neighborhoods of West Baltimore that are plagued by violence. The walks begin at the City’s Catholic parishes, such as St. Ambrose, St. Gregory the Great, St. Peter Claver, and St. Ignatius.

“It happened during one of those waves when we had a lot of violence in the city. I thought it would be a nice thing to go to these places and pray for the victims and pray with the people,” he added. “We started off with 20 or 30 people joining us and now we consistently have between 100 and 150. Before we begin each one, I emphasize that we are in the presence of Christ and we carry that through the streets.”

A cross leads the procession that includes priests, local Catholics, and other people of faith. The walks include several stops along the way—often where shootings have occurred—reading scriptures, singing hymns, and praying.



For the last four years, Bishop Denis Madden (left) has been leading prayer walks in the neighborhoods of West Baltimore that are plagued by violence. Copyright © Catholic Review Media. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

“We always feel so warm when Bishop Madden comes to the community,” said Candra Healy, Justice and Peace Committee chairperson at St. Ignatius. “People join the walk. It is a good feeling to go through the community and how much respect we are showing them. And they in turn are welcoming to us. It is a wonderful feeling and encourages me to want to continue this journey.”

“The feedback is very positive. People are always grateful that we come. We don’t pretend that it is going to end violence but they are effective because we are showing that we care,” Madden added. “One time we were by the Gilmore Homes, this woman rolls down her window and said, ‘Bishop, you be careful walking through this neighborhood.’ That told me the program is working. People feel drawn in, especially during this Lenten time.”

Gilmore Homes are located in Sandtown-Winchester, the same neighborhood where the death of Freddie Gray occurred in April 2015. One month after the unrest that followed, Madden led a prayer walk at St. Peter Claver.

“The community was in real pain. The people were on edge and it was a very tense time,” Madden explained. “Archbishop Lori and I went to St. Peter Claver the day after the riots. Fr. Ray Bomberger, the pastor, was out there with 30 or 40 people from the parish, sweeping in front of the church and cleaning up. One of the young men told me with all the media out there, he didn’t want people seeing the neighborhood like that. There is a lot of pride in these parishes and neighborhoods. We try to be respectful and humble to that while walking.”

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN MARYLAND SERVES AND ADVOCATES FOR THE POOR, VULNERABLE AND THOSE IN NEED NOT BECAUSE THEY ARE CATHOLIC, BUT BECAUSE WE ARE CATHOLIC.