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Nun uses parade of saints to teach religion lesson

By Linda Ann Chomin
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Sister Gemma Legel was waiting for the angels to arrive at Divine Savior Catholic Church in Westland late Monday afternoon when she stopped to talk about the Parade of Saints. The nun came up with the idea to bring the revered religious figures to life by having the first to eighth grade students dress up as saints for the event which was held in place of their regular catechism class. Shortly after everyone had taken their seats, including St. Gabriel and St. Michael the Archangel, she gave a short presentation.

In the chapel Sister Legel had assembled a display of relics including a piece of clothing worn by Fr. Solanus Casey, the priest who began the tradition of feeding the poor at the Capuchin Soup Kitchen in Detroit during The Great Depression. While Casey is not recognized as a saint, the Catholic Church is in the process of beatification or declaring the diseased priest as a subject of religious veneration. To become a saint, people either had to live as models of holiness or be martyred for their faith.

"We're here to honor saints and God and celebrating All Saints," said Sister Legel. She went on to explain the Feast of All Saints is usually observed on Nov. 1, but is not a holy day of obligation this year because it falls a day before Sunday. Instead Catholics celebrate All Souls Day Nov. 1-2, to remember the dead.

"How do you become a saint?" asked Sister Legel. "Most were ordinary people. They loved God and showed that love by loving their neighbor. We're saints in the making."

MEMORABLE LESSON

One by one the children came to the front of the room to tell about their saint. Kyle Broffitt, 9, of Plymouth, was St. Martin of Tours, the patron of soldiers.

"He gave it up (being a soldier)," Kyle said. "He didn't want to do violent acts."

Later, Kyle said he learned to honor saints and that saints can be pretty cool.

Karen Hobyak, 11, wasn't sure at first which saint she was going to be.

The Garden City girl was dressed in a green robe so it seemed only natural she would portray St. Patrick, her favorite. Nevertheless she was excited about the event, the first ever of its kind at Divine Savior.

"It's interesting how we're going to learn about saints," she said.

Christopher Pernak knew exactly who he was as the boy cradled a stuffed lamb. The 7-year-old borrowed the toy from his cousin to dress as St. Francis of Assisi in brown robes.

"He liked helping animals and people," said Christopher of Canton. "God created all kinds of creatures and they're my brothers and sisters.

His parents, Mary Pat and Larry Pernak, believe the parade was a great opportunity to introduce the saints to children.

"Chris has really had to read about the different saints," said Mary Pat Pernak.

"It's a good experience," added her husband, Larry. "It's educational."

Emily Gaffka of Westland was one of several Joan of Arcs in attendance. The 7-year-old was dressed in cardboard armor, spray painted gold.

"She was a warrior and she loved poor people," Emily said.

HONORING SAINTS, SOULS

Sister Legel and a number of staff had worked on the lesson for weeks. After the children had finished telling about their saints she had them parade around the church before heading off to their classrooms to make flags with the names of their patrons. Jeff Vernon was presiding over his third grade catechism students.

"There's the fun of Halloween, dressing up as and learning about saints and Hallows Eve which was a time to honor souls of people who had passed away," said Vernon of Canton.

Robbie Graham of Westland said it did help her children learn more about the saints. Logan, a first grade student, was Juan Diego, a Mexican peasant who was visited by the Blessed Mother (Jesus's mother).

Owen, a fourth grader, was Pope John XXIII.

"They were excited about dressing up and putting a costume together," Graham said.

Jodi Engler thinks the process will help her children retain their lesson on the saints longer. Katie, 9, was St. Margaret of Scotland, the queen who fed orphans and the poor before she would eat. Jenny, 7, was dressed as the North American Indian, Kateri Tekakwitha, patroness of ecology and the environment.

"I liked how it brought the saints to life, put a face with the name," Engler said.

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