



LOCAL NEWS

PRECIOUS BLOOD SISTERS REFLECT ON A DECADE OF HOMICIDE PRAYER VIGILS

The Catholic Telegraph / April 6, 2016 / 624

An annual homicide memorial service on March 12 at Salem Heights held added significance this year as it marked a decade since the Sisters of the Precious Blood reinstated homicide vigils in Dayton.

Ministers, officials from the Montgomery County Sheriff's Office and laypeople joined Precious Blood Sisters at the service to remember those killed by violence in Dayton-area neighborhoods during the past decade.

The names of more than 300 homicide victims in Dayton, Trotwood, and Jefferson and Harrison townships were listed on display boards, while the names of those killed in the past year were read aloud. A chime was rung after each month of names was read.

Whenever someone is murdered in one of the neighboring communities, the sisters coordinate a prayer vigil at the site of the killing to pray and remember the person who died. Sometimes friends and family members of the victim share their own memories.

The annual memorial service gives those who regularly attend the vigils an opportunity to come together for prayer and fellowship.

Precious Blood Sisters began the vigils in 1994 as a response to the number of homicides in Dayton. They prayed at 131 sites from April, 1994 through May, 1997, when they were unable to continue leading the project. Eventually, the vigils were discontinued.

The Sisters reinstated the vigils in March, 2006. They are held on Saturdays at noon.

"It came about as a rebirth of concern about the violence in the Dayton community," said Sister Jeanette Buehler, who coordinates the gatherings. "This has just been an ongoing problem in Dayton."

Since 2006, victims have ranged in age from a seven-month-old fetus who died after the mother was beaten to a 95-year-old man. Nine of the vigils have been for children under the age of five.

Typically, 15-20 people participate, but attendance has swelled to 50-70 at several vigils. Twice, more than 100 people showed up.

There were more than 50 people at a vigil for the Rev. William Schooler, a Dayton pastor who was shot and killed in his church by his brother at the end of a Sunday service last month.

Members of Rev. Schooler's church and pastors from other churches attended.

"It was one of the most powerful vigils I've been to in terms of the sharing by the church members themselves," Sister Jeanette said. "They shared so deeply of what he meant to them and how they are going to continue to carry on his work, and stand strong."

Many times, the gatherings generate powerful stories.

At the vigil for 95-year-old Oscar Benson, the dead man's son told of how he prays for the person who took his father's life so that God will show mercy on the killer before the perpetrator reaches the



Jan Reed, pastoral associate at Holy Trinity Church in Dayton, speaks during the annual homicide memorial service at Salem Heights on March 12. (Courtesy Photo/Sisters of the Precious Blood)

throne of God.

Sister Jeanette remembers the vigil for a teenage boy, an innocent bystander, who was killed in a drive-by shooting while coming home from a party. Nearly 70 people, mostly the boy's friends, attended the vigil. The boy's mother stood up and urged the teens to watch out one another because she didn't want to see any more young people killed.

Nearly a year after yet another vigil Sister Jeanette received a note from the victim's father. He had heard what the sisters had done and wanted to let her know how much he appreciated that someone cared for his son.

"We represent the community," Sister Jeanette said. "We cross community boundaries. We come together to say 'The community cares about what happens. We stand with you and we pray with you.'"

Residents appreciate that people from other areas care enough to come into their neighborhoods to pray, she added.

The sites and the stories change, but the message at each vigil remains the same: enough is enough.

"We're not here to make judgements on those for whom we pray. Our primary motivation is the preciousness of all life," Sister Jeanette said. "It takes all of us together to bear witness to the fact that this has to stop."