

'When our people suffer, we suffer with them'

Capuchin priest speaks about consoling family after children's murder

By JENNIFER WILLIAMS
Staff correspondent

On the day of his 14th anniversary as a priest, Father Dennis Klemash, O.F.M., Cap., spoke at the June 2 prayer vigil for the three Hispanic children from upper Park Heights, who were brutally murdered May 27.

"I was thinking to myself that was just a really defining moment of what it meant to be a priest," said Father Klemash, who is a Franciscan friar in residence at St. Ambrose parish in Park Heights. "I've long felt that one of the best qualities that has shaped my priesthood has been when people in need didn't have the words to speak and we were able to speak for them. My responsibility was to speak the words of faith that couldn't be spoken because of the grief."

But on the night of May 27, when the children, two 10-year-olds and a 9-year-old, were murdered, with one child beheaded and the others partially beheaded, Father Klemash did more than speak.

He was the priest who was available when police came knocking at the door of St. Ambrose, the Catholic church located less than two miles from the crime scene.

Father Klemash uses the word "providence" when explaining how it came to be that he was the priest chosen for the duty of administering Last Rites to the children.

"It was God's plan," said the thin, energetic priest with blue eyes shining from behind silver, wire-rimmed glasses. "It was the right thing, even though I wouldn't have chosen it by my own picking."

The pastor of St. Ambrose, Father Mick Joyce, O.F.M., Cap., was not home at the time police came, so the duty fell on the shoulders of Father Klemash, who is a full-time graduate student in Loyola College of Maryland's MBA program and an intern at the St. Michael Outreach Center

in Fells Point.

The priest said that the police told him it was a triple homicide and it was children. As they walked to the car, the officers told him, "Additionally, this is difficult because the family doesn't speak any English, only Spanish."

After spending three months in the Dominican Republic and a year in missionary ministry in Honduras working with the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, Father Klemash is fluent in Spanish.

In addition, the priest, who wears a hooded brown robe and sandals, is a former trauma chaplain at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia, where he has stood many times at the bedsides of patients and comforted families whose children have died.

Father Klemash likened being prepared to minister to the family and to bless the bodies of the children to a surgeon being prepared to face trauma or a firefighter expecting to be ready for a fire.

"When you become a priest, you don't expect to be ready for altar boy picnics, you expect to be ready for these kinds of moments and I think these are the things at the core of what it means to be a priest," Father Klemash said.

When he was a trauma chaplain, he said, "It's not that I expected to withdraw life support on the 32-year-old daughter of a family. It's not that I expected to one night come to work and find out that I was going to tell a family that their 19-year-old son was just run over by a car and was dead. You never expect the particular, but you anticipate those scenarios. I never know what calamity is going to befall us. We friars, our ministries are intensively urban and so we always say that we can expect the unexpected, predictably."

When it came to ministering to the family, Father Klemash said he talked to them on the grass in front of the apartment



CR/Owen Sweeney III

AT TRAGIC SCENE: Father Dennis Klemash, O.F.M., Cap., anointed the bodies of three children who were killed May 27.

complex and then they asked him to bless the bodies of their children.

Father Klemash said the scene was horrific, and on the spectrum of things, was probably as high as the bar has ever been raised for him in his 21 years as a friar.

"I was trembling when I was blessing the children," Father Klemash said. "I was crying when I was saying the prayers and when I finished the prayers, I just stood at the door with a handkerchief and wept with an officer."

Later, he talked with the family, who spoke of their Catholic traditions and how they pray the rosary daily. Father Klemash was joined by fellow Franciscans, Father Joyce and Father Ross Syracuse, O.F.M., Conv., who supported one another and offered comfort to the family.

While some might consider moments like this one of the more difficult aspects of the priesthood, Father Klemash considers it one of the most personally rewarding.

"I'd say that they're the most

professionally challenging, but I think that in the end, they are the most appreciated by the faithful," said Father Klemash, as he sat in on the porch of the friary, police sirens wailing in the distance.

He said in times of trauma, one of the most important things is to show tenderness to the family and to say as little as possible.

"I think that the most important thing that you do is you stand calmly, warmly, tenderly with people," Father Klemash said. "It is the wrong time to try to solve the mystery of evil. When a woman like those mothers, when a father like that father, are only two hours away from the murder of their children, you don't explain it away. You hold them, you sit with them and you show tenderness."

Father Klemash said praying, showing compassion to the needy and his daily ministry are what make him prepared for those difficult moments.

"It affects you," Father Klemash said. "It emblazons itself onto your memory. But

what has been a blessing in my life is that I come home to house that is prayerful, and to a community that prays and to brothers who sit at my table every night."

He said the Capuchin Franciscans are known as "the Brothers among the people."

"When our people suffer, we suffer with them," said Father Klemash, who himself was carjacked at gunpoint while living in Philadelphia.

And when Father Klemash reflects on the whole situation, he says he knows it wasn't him the family needed.

"It was the priesthood that served them," Father Klemash said. "It was my vocation as a friar. I don't care if they remember my name, but they'll remember that the church was present for them and that someone blessed their children."

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