Historic black organization comes to Alexandria

Black History Month welcomes Bishop Paul S. Loverde Council

Dave Borowski | Catholic Herald

Men in dark suits, dark ties and white shirts sat in an old St. Joseph School classroom in Alexandria Feb. 22 waiting nervously for their initiation ceremony into the Knights of Peter Claver to begin. Nearby in St. Joseph Church, women in white dresses also waited for the ceremony that would welcome them to the Knights of Peter Claver Ladies Auxiliary.

The Knights of Peter Claver, a historically black men’s Catholic lay organization, was establishing its first council in the Arlington Diocese. It was something that parishioners like Deacon Albert A. Anderson and Patricia English had been working toward for some time.

The Knights of Peter Claver’s mission is “to render service to God and His holy church, render aid and assistance to the sick and disabled, and promote social and intellectual association among our members.”

The Knights have about 300 councils for men and about 300 courts for women throughout North and South America.

The group was founded in 1909 in Mobile, Ala., by Josephite Father Conrad Friedrich Rebesher and was named for St. Peter Claver, a Spanish priest who ministered to African slaves in Colombia, South America, in the 17th century. The Knights were established in an age of segregation to give black Catholic men the opportunity for full membership in a Catholic fraternal organization.

The new council at St. Joseph is named Bishop Paul S. Loverde Council 398 to honor the man who was instrumental and supportive in establishing it.

Bishop Loverde joined 13 other men in the secret and sacred initiation ceremony. The bishop chose to go through the entire initiation ceremony that is usually waived for the clergy.

After the ceremony, Josephite Father Donald Fest, St. Joseph pastor, addressed the new Knights. He told the men that he was proud of them and asked them to work to establish a junior Knights and junior Daughters program for their children and grandchildren.

“It would be a great experience for our youth,” he said. He urged the new Knights to inspire other men to join the council.
The men went on to recall their reasons for joining. The answers were similar — Catholic service.

James Lightfoot is involved in a prison ministry and wanted to find additional men to help him minister to this largely forgotten population.

Deacon Steve Morello, who assists at the church, said his reason was simple.“I was asked,” he said, and added, “Service is more effective if it’s organized.”

Deacon Anderson said he is also a Knight of Columbus but joined the Knights of Peter Claver as an alternative adding, “This is not a competition.”

Father Bekeh Utietiang, pastor of St. James Church in McMechen and St. John Church in Benwood, both in West Virginia, was there to promote his St. Peter Claver Scholarship Fund at Sts. James and John School.

James Brown came from St. Jude Church in Fredericksburg to be part of the historic event.

There was another common thread among the men: Almost all said that Deacon Anderson was instrumental in encouraging them to join.

Like Deacon Anderson, many of the men are also Knights of Columbus but joined the Knights of Peter Claver because of the shared experience.

Joseph Brooks, the new grand Knight, said, “It’s a great honor,” to be asked to serve, adding that there are great people around him to help make it work.

After the initiation, the men and women gathered in the church for an establishment Mass celebrated by Bishop Loverde.

In his homily, the bishop said that this establishment “marks a significant moment in this diocese.”

Officers of both the council and the court were installed after Mass and given the symbols of their authority and official papers.

There were many thanks to go around especially to Deacon Anderson, Patricia English and Bishop Loverde. The bishop said, “I am happy to be an instrument to bring this to fruition.”

With pomp and circumstance the ceremony ended and all processed out to begin their new lives of service to the church.