

## Racine youth pray for first responders, peace

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Dulce Contreras could have chosen to go to a school dance that Friday evening. And her Girl Scout troop was also getting together that night.

Instead, Dulce, 11, decided to attend a Blue Mass.

"I told my dad that I'm not missing this Blue Mass. This is something I want to be at," she said.

Dulce was one of 25 high school and middle school students who attended at St. Richard Parish, Racine, Friday, May 20.

A Blue Mass is a Mass celebrated for those who work in the public safety field. The color blue refers to the blue-colored uniforms often worn by police officers, firefighters and emergency personnel.

"The purpose of a Blue Mass is to celebrate all of the people who sacrifice their lives for us daily. And it was held to have the church pray for them in the time being," said Dulce, who attends St. Patrick, Racine.

The Blue Mass offered a time to pray for the safety of police officers as well as for peace in the community.

Students attending the Mass served as lectors, greeters or servers.

"It was wonderful to see the kids involved and engaged in their faith. I'm a parishioner at St. Joe's (in Racine). Even though the school is involved with the parish, you don't always see that level of engagement. Your kids showed a great level of engagement and dedication, and they are comfortable in church. And that is awesome," said Racine Deputy Police Chief Chuck Weitzel.

The Mass was attended by Racine Police Chief Arthell Howell and other police officers, as well as a representative from U.S. Rep. Paul Ryan's office and County Board Supervisor Melissa Becker.

The Fourth Degree Knights of Columbus were part of the procession. In addition, the Knights and Educators Credit Union paid for pins distributed to the public safety officials and a reception following the Mass.

Not all of the first responders in attendance were Catholic.

"We were going to make it an ecumenical prayer service, but we decided that we did not want to lose our Catholic identity," said Eloy Contreras, youth minister for ACTS (Active Catholics Teens in Service) youth ministry program. "We wanted to highlight who we are, and the values and the principles we have because of our Catholic identity."

Xaverian Fr. Alejandro Rodriguez, vocation director for the Xaverian Missionaries, celebrated the Mass, providing an opportunity for the youth to interact with police officers.

"It helped the kids understand that whatever is said about the police in the media, we have to still pray for them because they are the ones who help the communities to keep going," he said.



Diana Gonzalez, left, a member of ACTS, (Active Catholics Teens in Service), a Racine-area youth group, pins a lapel pin of St. Michael, the patron saint of police officers, on the uniform of Racine Police Chief, Arthell Howell during a Blue Mass celebrated at St. Richard Parish, Racine, on Friday, May 20. (Submitted photo courtesy Eloy Contreras)

During his homily, Fr. Rodriguez told the officers that they have been called to serve others, even though the people don't always appreciate what they are doing.

"Nobody has greater love than giving his own life for a friend," the priest said. "Think about it. You have to risk your life for those who are sometimes are your friends, but most of the times for those who consider you an enemy. If you realize that you are called by God to serve the community, then you would do your best to try to protect that community, even if your life is in danger. Considering that, you are called to be the extension of the protection of God."

During the Mass, the youth presented each police officer with a lapel pin of St. Michael, the patron saint for police officers. The students promised to continue to pray for all who are in law enforcement.

"It meant a lot to me because it showed me that my prayers are in their hands right now," Dulce said.

The police officers were grateful for the prayers.

"We need it, we love it, we appreciate it," said Weitzel, who has been a police officer for more than 30 years.

The students involved with the Blue Mass are all part of ACTS. The youth ministry program was formed as a joint program for St. Patrick, St. Richard and St. Edward parishes in Racine. The mission of ACTS is to ignite in teens a passion for lifelong learning rooted in service, justice and fellowship.

Using the Gospel message, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men," the group designed its own logo with the letters ACTS made into the shape of a fish. The T is shaped like a hook.

"We want to educate young people to be fishers of men to live out the Gospel. That is what the fish stands for and the hook," Contreras said.

He said the program has been an answer to Protestant churches in the area that have successfully been evangelizing to youth.

"Oftentimes I feel like with the Catholic Church, we catechize young people, but we don't really do anything extra with them. We don't help them foster their relationship with God," Contreras said. "Now with ACTS, we can keep the kids with the church and keep them active."

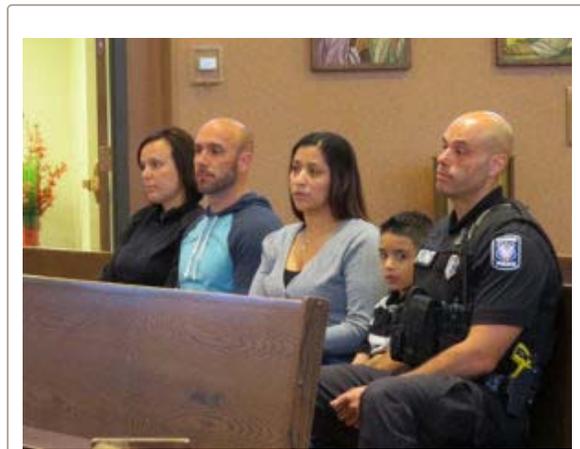
Their desire to participate in the Blue Mass seems to indicate it's working, according to Contreras.

"It's not easy to get 25 to 30 kids to come to a Mass on a Friday night in 70-degree weather. These kids could be doing something different," Contreras said. "But they feel the importance of what this Blue Mass meant. They feel the importance of what their faith is, and so they are demonstrating how important their faith is."

Middle school and high school students meet regularly through ACTS. The group visits with veterans and participates in activities to support those with handicaps. They hold social events, as well as attend eucharistic adoration regularly. This summer the group will be active with numerous service projects.

"That is our mission. We want to have these kids carry out social justice as well as some social events together. Pray together, work together," Contreras said.

And now, the group also will pray for police officers throughout the year.



Anne Spaulding, left to right, Officer Joe Spaulding, Tina Ortiz, Rob Ortiz Jr., and Officer Rob Ortiz, listen to Xaverian Fr. Alejandro Rodriguez's homily during the Friday, May 20 Blue Mass celebrated for public safety officials at St. Richard Parish, Racine. (Submitted photo courtesy Eloy Contreras)

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