News



People gather at a vigil at Lynnhurst Park after a fatal shooting at the Annunciation Catholic School, Aug. 27 in Minneapolis. (RNS/AP/Bruce Kluckhohn)

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The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis' Office for the Mission of Catholic Education has asked people to pray the rosary at 10 a.m. CT Sept. 5 for those affected by the Aug. 27 shooting at Annunciation Catholic Church in Minneapolis that killed two schoolchildren and injured 21 others.

Archbishop Bernard Hebda of St. Paul and Minneapolis will lead a livestream of the rosary via the archdiocese's Facebook page. The prayer intention also includes an end to violence against children.

The Archdiocese of New York announced Sept. 3 that its schools would pray the rosary at that time to "join spiritually with the Catholic Schools of the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis" and encouraged others to join them.

In a message shared on social media, Jason Slattery, the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis' superintendent of schools and director of Catholic education, said that some staff members of the Office for the Mission of Catholic Education have been working at Annunciation Catholic School since shortly after the shooting to show support and solidarity with the school's leaders, teachers and staff.

"And while it is true that there is a suffering that is almost too difficult to mention, it is met by heroic examples of virtue and hope," he said. "School children and parishioners were struck down in the parish church while they gathered to worship God. And two beautiful students, Fletcher and Harper, were taken from their families and classmates, while a number of other children and parishioners remain in the hospital with wounds.

"Every soul under that roof that day was a witness and a victim of a terrible crime against innocents," he continued. "Let's continue to pray for all of them as we give them space to grieve and, in time, heal."

Speaking to OSV News Aug. 28 from Annunciation, Slattery said he had visited the school hours after the shooting to help Principal Matt DeBoer and the school's staff.

In the immediate aftermath of the violence, "I saw a group of people who were showing us what heroic virtue looks like, truly," he said. "These are people … that have been absolutely committed to the faith, the care of their students and their families that are served by the parish school. I saw acts of just heroic charity, love and care for others that I'll never forget."

In his written message, Slattery encouraged people to consider the "accounts of heroic charity" that shine amid the darkness of the shooting, including older students who protected younger ones, and adults who raced to shelter the children and elderly.

"As we begin this school year, as hard as it may be at the present moment, in solidarity let's work to build up, protect and secure schools of Christian hope and allow the light of that hope to outshine the violence that was done to our dear ones," he wrote.

In addition to prayer, local Catholic school and parish officials were urged to review their safety and security plans, get to know local law enforcement officers, and seek help from them with those plans, extra patrols and training.

Paul Iovino, director of the archdiocese's Office of Ministerial Standards and Safe Environment and a former police officer, asked parishes and schools to maintain a heightened level of security, with exterior doors locked and visitor access suspended or with strict practices in place when allowing visitors to enter.

"We are not aware of any current threats to any parishes or schools," Iovino said in an open letter to Catholic officials. It is also important to recognize that there is a balance "between creating a space where parents, staff and the faithful feel safe and having too many security measures that may create undue stress," he wrote.

Iovino encouraged officials to join the archdiocese's security managers information group that meets twice a month to discuss security and safety issues, host guest speakers and announce upcoming training events.

The funeral for Fletcher Merkel, who died in the shooting, is 4 p.m. Sept. 7 at Mount Olivet Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. The 8-year-old was a third-grade student at Annunciation Catholic School. The family has asked attendees to wear bright colors, not black.

One other Annunciation student died during the shooting at an all-school Mass: 10-year-old Harper Moyski, a fifth grader. Funeral information for Moyski was not yet available.

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While several GoFundMe fundraisers have been established to benefit victims wounded in the shooting to support their physical healing, the Catholic Community Foundation of Minnesota, or CCF, has established the Annunciation Hope and Healing Fund to "provide financial support to the Church of the Annunciation for the needs of the church and school and to provide support to those affected by the tragedy."

Eighteen of the surviving wounded victims were children; three were elderly adults. Two children remain hospitalized, including 12-year-old Sophia Forchas, who remains in critical condition with head injuries.

Wearing a T-shirt reading, "A future filled with hope," Fr. Dennis Zehren, Annunciation's pastor, expressed gratitude in a video posted by CCF. "We welcome the light of a new day at Annunciation," he said. "It is a light that will scatter every darkness, it is a light that will never be extinguished, and it is the Light of the World, Jesus Christ."

"We just want to thank you for the great outpouring of love that you've been sending our way through these very difficult times," he said.

Reiterating an image that he shared in a homily at the parish's first Mass after the shooting, he said, "I was reminded of the image in Scripture when the Israelites were in battle and Moses would lift his hands in prayer, and when his arms grew tired they would put a rock under his arms so that he could keep praying. That's what you've been for us. You've been that rock underneath us that keeps us lifting our hearts and hands in prayers, lifting our thoughts and minds to a better day and to a greater glory. So we just keep following that holy light."

The shooting took place during Annunciation Catholic School's first all-school Mass of the academic year. A former student, the 23-year-old fired from the church's exterior through stained-glass windows into the church before dying of a self-inflicted gunshot in the parking lot. The church and PreK-to-eighth-grade school

share a campus in south Minneapolis.

While investigators continue to seek a clear motive for the shooter's actions, FBI Director Kash Patel said in a post on X Aug. 27, "The FBI is investigating this shooting as an act of domestic terrorism and hate crime targeting Catholics."

Vice President JD Vance, a Catholic, and second lady Usha Vance visited the Annunciation campus Sept. 3 to pay respects to the shooting victims and meet with school leaders and the Merkel and Moyski families. They also stopped at Children's Minnesota Hospital to visit Annunciation student Lydia Kaiser, who is recovering from surgery after being shot, with her family.

In a statement posted that day on X, JD Vance noted that he met "a beautiful girl," presumably Kaiser, who was "recovering well, thank God," and asked people to "Pray for Sophia, who continues to fight for her life every day. Pray for her health, pray for her swelling to be controlled, and pray for strength for her parents, doctors, and nurses." He also said the families asked that attention be focused on Merkel and Moyski and not the shooter.

During a press conference following the visit Sept. 3, Harry and Leah Kaiser, Lydia Kaiser's parents, called for action from Vance and other U.S. leaders.

"Vice President Vance, you have enormous authority. Please use this moment to move your feet and transcend our political divides to promote peace and unity and hope," she said. "This is what the people of the United States will hold you accountable to. This Annunciation community is a force of good in the world, and we invite you to be the same."

She noted that among the messages left in the temporary memorial surrounding the church is the Prayer of St. Francis, which begins, "Make me an instrument of your peace," and she read the prayer.

Harry Kaiser, Annunciation School's gym teacher, read a message he had shared with Vance earlier that day. He thanked the vice president for visiting Lydia and noted that there are many areas in which he disagrees with the vice president.

"We both know both sides, and all the talking points we fall back on," he said. "But on just this one issue of gun violence, will you please promise me as a father and a Catholic, that you will earnestly support the study of what is wrong with our culture

that we are the country that has the worst mass shooter problem?

"We were at Mass, singing about being called to act with justice, love, service and humility," he continued. "Will you please promise to pursue, despite powerful lobbies, some commonsense bipartisan legislation as a starting point, so we can come out of our corners and find the values that we share so that this time some progress is made?

"Thoughts and prayers haven't been enough; many policies have been dismissed without even being studied or tried. It's so complicated. I don't claim to have the answers but we have to commit to looking. Then we can feel good about defending life.

"If one thing changes for the better, perhaps Fletcher's and Harper's deaths and all the injuries and destruction might bring about even more unity, love and light than I have already seen this past week," he said. "One law, one executive order, one policy. You can call it the 'Annunciation Bill.' Then I'll be able to look Lydia and Sophia and all my students in the eye and say I tried."