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US Redemptorists launch day of blessing for arthritics

by NCR Staff

Aug. 1 saw the launch of what promises to become an annual event in Redemptorist parishes and retreat centers across the United States: a day of blessing for arthritics.

The event was celebrated for the first time this year. Aug. 1 is the feast day of St. Alphonsus Liguori, the 18th-century Italian founder of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, known as the Redemptorists.

St. Alphonsus suffered from severe arthritis. He spent the last years of his life bound to a chair or propped up in bed. He died Aug. 1, 1787, at the age of 91.

"This is the first blessing of its kind, as far as we know, on a national scale, for people who suffer the chronic and debilitating agonies of arthritis, fibromyalgia and other serious physical conditions," said Fr. Thomas Picton, Redemptorist superior of the Denver province.

According to reports from the parishes and centers in the Denver province, the first event met with overwhelming success. Each saw a sizable increase in attendance at each of its Masses on Aug. 1, said Bruce Crane, the communications director of the Denver province.

This includes Fr. Sam Maranto's parish, St. Gerard Majella in Baton Rouge, La., where Mass attendance more than doubled, from 350 to 370 worshipers for a typical Sunday to about 850 on Aug. 1. People came from throughout the city and other towns, some driving up to an hour to attend the blessing.

People in wheelchairs, canes and walkers lined the center aisle.

"Many of these folks came from some distance and some of them at some pain to receive this blessing. I was personally moved by their own faith that they placed in this event and this blessing," Maranto said.

After Mass, Maranto and Deacon Lamar Partin invited people to come forward. Each was touched with a cross that contained a small relic of St. Alphonsus, a blessing was recited, and each was given a prayer card.

?Some hoped that the blessing would have some miraculous effect, be it physical, emotional or spiritual in their life. You could really see it in some of their eyes. A few of them had tears in their eyes, very many of them when they received the blessing had their eyes closed, very prayerful,? Maranto said.

?We put our hands on the people in a sacramental sign of touch, the blessing is addressed directly and forcefully, I think, but prayerfully to the person.

?They came hoping for either some cure, some relief or to reaffirm their faith in God for what they go through and suffer every day, kind of an oblation or an offering of their suffering.

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?They didn?t show up expecting to drop their crutches or jump out of their wheelchairs and dance home, but in many instances you could see these people wanted to unite what they were going through with St. Alphonsus? own notion of suffering.?

Maranto said, ?My own faith was buoyed up by the faith and hope I thought I glimpsed in the eyes of those I blessed. Laboring under the burdens of ministry in a parish such as St. Gerard, it?s not unheard of to become resigned to the situation or to lose hope. Over the years, I?ve touched all these bases. The faith of those to whom I minister has always been what has brought me back to the center, back from hopelessness or helplessness.

?Many of them asked me if this will be an annual event. And I said ?Yeah, we?ll make it an annual event.? ?

Arthritis is one of the most prevalent chronic health problems and the nation?s leading cause of disability among Americans over age 15, according to the Arthritis Foundation. About 46 million American suffer from arthritis or chronic joint pain.

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