

ST. EUGENE'S WORSHIP CIRCLE ALLOWS STUDENTS TO LEAD

Colleen Jurkiewicz | February 21, 2018/Catholic Herald

Worship Circle, a monthly program at St. Eugene's School in Fox Point, begins with a call to prayer — and to silence.

"Be quiet inside, and know that God is here," says the story leader, today a fifth-grader, to the assembled congregation — a hushed half-circle of her classmates as well as the whole first grade. Between them stands a single lit candle, an open Bible and an array of felt materials and wooden figures. In a moment, these simple props of felt and wood will transform into the River Jordan, John the Baptist and a host of newly baptized Christians ready to embrace the Gospel message.

But as she tells this Bible story — mostly for the benefit of the first-graders, but certainly for their fifth-grade mentors ("guardian angels," they're called), as well — she won't use many words, and she won't look up to make eye contact with her audience. It may seem strange, to neglect such staples of public speaking, but it's actually very intentional, and was part of the training she received to become a student storyteller.

Because at Worship Circle, it's not as much about the story as it is about the silence, and not as much the teaching of a lesson as the quiet invitation for the Holy Spirit to take up residence in the hearts of the students.

"Everything we do in Worship Circle is a form of prayer," said Margy Slattery, St. Eugene Worship Circle coordinator.

The program is offered once per month during religion class time for kindergarteners through fourth-graders, who are always accompanied by their "guardian angels" — partners in fifth through eighth grade. It's the older children who really run the program, which takes place in a room off the parish hall. Though Slattery and the classroom teachers are always present, they literally take a backseat, sitting quietly in the back of the room observing while the students tell the stories, lead the prayers and play the selected music.

Slattery first became acquainted with the Worship Circle program while living in Cincinnati, and introduced it to St. Eugene's in 2003 when she returned to her native Milwaukee and enrolled her children at the school. Initially, the program was only offered to kindergarteners and the stories and prayers were led by adults — but by 2011, the older students missed Worship Circle time so much that Slattery introduced the guardian angel program. The change not only encouraged leadership in the older children, but also set a good example for the younger ones.

"By showing their reverence for God and their interest in the Bible, they naturally encourage their classmates and the younger students to actively participate," said Slattery.

Every Worship Circle session begins with the moment of silence, Sign of the Cross and the telling of the Bible story. Following that, there is the “wondering together” segment where students discuss faith-sharing questions meant to draw meaning from the story.

After that comes the art response, where students and guardian angels draw in their faith journals. Worship Circle closes with prayers of thanks, both silent and verbal, a song, and the Sign of the Cross.

The format of the program closely resembles the Montessori-inspired Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, but focuses more on Scriptural stories than the liturgy itself. In the Worship Circle room, the cabinets are well-stocked both with the wooden figurines and a great variety of other handcrafted materials to aid in the storytelling experience — everything from a miniature Ark of the Covenant to a wooden liturgical calendar.

First-grade teacher Cathy Bartkowski said she especially loves the program’s interactive nature. Through the drawing and discussion segments, she said, her students “gain a better understanding of the stories as well as create a stronger bond with their guardian angels.”

“It brings the scripture stories to life for my first-graders,” she said.

In her fifth-graders, teacher Katie Dewey said she has seen an increase in their ability to memorize and relate a Bible story in a reverent and engaging way. “They take great pride because they are the role models for their guardian angels,” she said.

The joy of the experience, for Slattery, lies in creating avenues through which the students can find themselves connected with the Bible stories and the history of salvation.

St. Eugene principal Rebecca Jones called the program a “tremendous” opportunity to impart the school’s Catholic identity to its students. “It allows all students to be involved,” she said. “Students know and understand the Gospel and it helps to promote service.”