

Chaplain trains to become firefighter

Liz Quirin/CNS

BELLEVILLE, Ill. — Like many priests, Father Mark Reyling wears more than one hat.

The pastor of St. Catherine Laboure Parish in Cahokia, in the Belleville Diocese, is also a chaplain for the town's police and fire departments.

"He's our brother. He's one of us" is how the Cahokia Fire Department's Assistant Chief Mike Preson describes the department's chaplain and his pastor.

The department's Lt. David Everhart said it is important to have a chaplain, especially when someone dies in a fire, since fatalities have a devastating effect on families and firefighters.

"When you lose a life, it brings you down. You feel somehow like you haven't done your job," Everhart told *The Messenger*, diocesan newspaper of Belleville.

When he signed on as chaplain at the fire department in 2001, Father Reyling had already been serving as chaplain for the local police department for a year.

The 37-year-old priest said his role gives him "the opportunity to interact with so many different people," noting that "part of being a priest is the care of all souls, not just the Catholic souls but all souls."

Bob Darnell, fire department president, described the priest as a great help. "He listens and understands. He's good for the community and comforting to a family" that has suffered loss through a fire whether it's a loss of life or property.

Part of Father Reyling's ability to comfort a grieving family comes from his vocation as priest and pastor. But he understands the firefighters better than others because he is becoming a certified firefighter as well.

With one last certification re-

quirement to go, Father Reyling is a probationary firefighter. That makes it easier for him to understand and comfort the firefighters, and they recognize his ability to fight fires and comfort firefighters and families.

And, according to his training officer, Cris Burch, Father Reyling is "beginning to be one of the best engineers we have." The engineer drives the fire truck and makes sure firefighters receive the water they need from the truck.

Burch sees this additional firefighter role as a bonus. "He risks his life just like the rest of us. Sometimes what you see hits you, and it's easier to talk to someone you know."

If a firefighter needs on-site counseling, or a family needs comforting, Father Reyling may be "taken off the fire side" to go "over to the chaplain side," Burch said.

Father Reyling remembers one incident last September where he moved back and forth between family members and firefighters, listening and offering words of comfort. He had just finished Mass when his pager alerted him to a fire emergency. When he called to see if he should come to the scene, the priest was told he was particularly needed because a 3-year-old boy had been killed in the fire.

"You're walking up to the scene as one of our firefighters is walking back. The closer he gets, the harder he starts to cry. We stop. We talk," the priest said.

After consoling the firefighter, Father Reyling went to the house to bless the boy's body before finding the family.

He acknowledged that it is difficult to comfort a family that has lost a child, but said that just having someone on the scene can begin the process of grief that a family will continue to go through as time passes.



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Father Mark Reyling climbs on board a firetruck in Cahokia, Ill. A fire department chaplain since 2001, he has taken the courses and steps to become a certified firefighter.

He also assures the firefighters that they're doing the best job they can and reminds them they're not alone.

Father Reyling emphasizes that his roles as fire and police chaplains must be seen in the context of his role as pastor. "The people of St. Catherine's come first," he said. For liturgies and parish meetings, his pager is turned off.

Playing a visible role in the community also offers opportunities for

evangelizing by example.

"I've met more former Catholics this way," the priest said. "Sometimes folks will come back because they're invited in an entirely different way."

The relationships he has established with police and firefighters, with families in the parish and the broader community are all part of what makes Father Reyling's ministry most rewarding.

As he puts it: "It's what I do."

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