

Director puts Billiken Teacher Corps in 'Teach Me' mode

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New and returning members of the Billiken Teacher Corps were in for a ride after the program of St. Louis University's School of Education named its first director.

The new director, Father Ronny O'Dwyer, ordained as a Jesuit priest last year, has an infectious enthusiasm and a zeal for his faith and education. In preparing for the upcoming school year, he literally took the teacher corps members on a ride — a pilgrimage, as Father O'Dwyer called it. The 13 educators and their director spent a few evenings in a rented 15-passenger van visiting the 12 schools where they'll teach. He blessed their classrooms, and they placed a plaque with the words "Teach Me" in each room.

The simple sentence is part of St. Ignatius' prayer for generosity. Each line of the prayer begins with the words, "Teach Me" — to be generous, to serve, to give, to fight, to labor.

In partnership with the St. Louis Archdiocese and beginning its second year, the Billiken Teacher Corps places college graduates as teachers in underserved Catholic schools for two years. During that time, they earn a graduate degree in education with full tuition remission. The teacher corps members live together in an intentional faith community focused on spiritual and personal formation in the Catholic, Jesuit tradition.

Father O'Dwyer, at a reception Aug. 11, said the "Teach Me" tagline is a prayer to God but also a call from students. "Anyone who has ever taught knows that teachers learn from their students. So to the students, too, we say teach me — teach me how to be Christ for you," he said.

While studying at St. Louis University, Father O'Dwyer taught at Loyola Academy and De Smet Jesuit High School. He called the Billiken Teacher Corps "new life being blown into our Catholic schools." Their work is an extension of the teaching ministry of Jesus, he said, and their work is a mission. Mass, retreats and prayer help them grow in intimacy with Jesus, because "if they're going to teach like Jesus they have to know Him. They have to have Him in their heart."

Billiken Teacher Corps member Jenny Bruns, in her second year at Christ Light of the Nations School in north St. Louis County, said Father O'Dwyer helps participants incorporate their faith into their lives every day. "He does it in such a genuine and humble way that it brings you closer to Christ," she said.

Eileen Orbals met the young Jesuit while teaching English at De Smet Jesuit, and she gave up tickets at the Mundy to attend the reception. "I would walk down the hall after school and he'd have a group of students with him," Orbals said. "How lucky they were to have someone with such great common sense and such a spiritual approach. It was very comfortable to sit and talk with him. He's bigger than life."

Father O'Dwyer was "phenomenal" as a teacher, said one of his former De Smet students, Steve Trottier of St. Clement of Rome Parish in Des Peres. "He was so animated and charismatic," Trottier said. "This role is a natural fit for him. He'll impart a lot of knowledge to the new teachers."

Father O'Dwyer also will serve as a clinical faculty member in the Institute for Catholic Education at St. Louis University.

Father Ronald R. O'Dwyer, SJ

CHILDHOOD: Born in New Orleans. His great-uncle was a Jesuit, and he was an altar boy at the Jesuits' Immaculate Conception Church. When Father O'Dwyer was 10, he and his family moved to Denver, where he attended Regis Jesuit High School. Father O'Dwyer had felt a calling to the priesthood as a young boy, and a service trip to Belize in his senior year strengthened that calling.

EDUCATION: He earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy in 2005 from Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., before entering the Jesuit novitiate. As a novice, Father O'Dwyer taught religion at Loyola Academy, a Nativity



Father Ronny O'Dwyer, SJ, director of the Billiken Teacher Corp at St. Louis University, was welcomed to the university at a reception Aug. 11 at SLU's Pere Marquette Gallery in St. Louis.

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school in St. Louis. He earned master's degrees in philosophy and education from St. Louis University. Father O'Dwyer served at De Smet Jesuit High School and at Loyola Academy. He earned a master of divinity degree from Boston College School of Theology and Ministry.

ORDINATION: He was ordained last summer and celebrated his first Mass as a Jesuit priest at Immaculate Conception Church in New Orleans. In the fall, he returned to Boston College to continue studies for his licentiate in sacred theology, with a focus on American Catholic history.

Father O'Dwyer wrote about discerning a vocation at www.stlouisreview.com/bWf (http://jesuitvocations.org/Assets/Publications/File/DL_MIDWEST.005.pdf).

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