In Thanks for the Everyday Heroes of our Police, Firefighters and Paramedics

Over the years as a priest, I've had the chance to get to know a number of people who serve our communities in law enforcement, on fire departments and who work as paramedics. The priest who presented me with my vestments (part of the ordination rite) I served Mass for as a teenager (Fr. Vince Colon's successor, Fr. Terry Hayes) was also the police chaplain for the Minneapolis Police Department, and would share with me many stories of the officers he had gotten to know over the years. And though he had long since retired when I knew him as a child, my grandpa Mike was a deputy sheriff for a number of years in Spokane, Washington before moving here to Minnesota.

Last Sunday, February 18 we were all horrified when Officer Paul Elmstrand, Officer Matthew Ruge and Paramedic Adam Finseth were murdered while responding to a domestic emergency call in Burnsville. As we all know, people who serve as first responders put their lives on the line every day to keep us safe. When people are running out of a burning building or away from a violent situation, these are the people who are going in.

If you dig a little bit, you can also find so many stories out there about the good that first responders do in our communities too; there are stories of police officers helping a child who had their bike stolen by getting another one back; a police officer stopping by to toss a football around with some inner city kids; the fire department sending a fire truck to a 6-year old's house who had no one come to his birthday party; officers going out of their way to help the elderly, and so many other good stories. By in large, I think most people really do see the good that first responders do.

The tragedy that occurred in Burnsville is a reminder that our first responders need our support more than ever. And I think there's a few simple things that we can all do to show them how much we care.

For one, we can pray for them. From time to time at daily Masses, I'll include prayers for police, firefighters and paramedics in the intentions. We can also pray for the fallen and their families.

Second, when we see someone in uniform, we can say "thank you" for all the hard work they do. Or wave or smile when a police car goes by.

Third, we can speak up for the good that first responders do. Sometimes people get cynical towards police; but a recent survey showed 85% of people are very satisfied with their local police departments.

Fourth, consider checking with local departments to see if there's anything you can do to volunteer, or if they can use anything. I recently checked to see if there was something we could do from the school or parish, and was told that officers and firefighters for instance appreciated "grab and go" type snacks they could have in the

car. Even sending a note or greeting card with a letter is a great way to show that you care.

Fifth, maybe you know a first responder. While I haven't served as a chaplain, I have been on site with first responders at some intense situations; a teen suicide; an infant who suddenly died; at a school with kids when a student took his life. These are intense situations. I know I need advice and counsel from good friends who I can talk through things more deeply with. Doing what you can to journey with them, to be there for them, to listen, to offer support really matters. Even if you aren't in close contact with a first responder, I think it's so important to have an appreciation for all that they do; the job never really ends for them as they deal with so many challenging things day in and day out that can't just be left "at the office." On top of this, many are working well more than 40 hours a week as police in particular are dealing with a crisis in falling numbers of officers on the job.

Sixth, in the event you are ever pulled over, think about what is said. Officers deal with so much, and some people think the officer is "out to get them," not that they were following to close, on the phone, or ran a light. The officer doesn't make the laws, they enforce the laws, and odds are if you are courteous you'll be treated fairly in return.

Seventh, connect with first responders on social media. You can like page, comment and engage with local departments.

Eighth, look for events that connect citizens and first responders. There's Coffee with a Cop, open houses, and other events happening throughout the year.

Ninth, you can attend support local department fundraising events, along with charities that support fallen officers such as the National Law Enforcement Memorial Fund, the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation and the National EMS Memorial Foundation. Minnesota also offers special plates where the annual small fee supports first responders and proceeds go to grieving families.

Lastly, think about where candidates stand on issues related to police in particular. I think this is especially important in an election year. Have they been supportive of police? Do they support funding for first responders? Wether running for city council or president, crime and law and order are key issues - so do some digging to see what a candidate's position is.

We are so blessed to have men and women who every day go into work, and when we need them in an emergency, will be there to help us doing what they do because they want to help humanity and people in need. What they do is one of the most difficult jobs imaginable - so let us do all we can to show our thanks and support.

God bless our first responders.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Paul