

M Mourning the loss of your child

Grieving the Loss of a Child

On the Feast of All Saints, Nov. 1, Burlington Bishop Salvatore R. Matano will celebrate Mass at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Burlington at 7 p.m. The bishop welcomes all to attend, and invites especially parents who are mourning the loss of a child or children through death, miscarriage, or abortion.

Most of us have experience with grief: the death of our grandparents and parents, perhaps the death of a dear friend. Oftentimes, for lack of anything else to say, a well-intentioned person will offer that “time heals all wounds.” And yet, when parents are mourning a child, time is all they want — more time to be with their child. Time also can be a constant reminder of what could have been, what might have been. Many grieving parents say that as their child would be approaching various milestones, they grieve anew. Their child continues with them, because they are forever the parents of the child who is separated from them.

Few grieving parents are able to acknowledge the extent of their pain to others, for fear perhaps of further isolation. People don’t like talking about death — especially that of a child. Grief is tough — hard on the heart and the spirit. Once, in a parent support group, a mother was lamenting how her son’s death never affected her husband as it did her. Suddenly, the dad looked up, and quietly said he just never wanted to increase her pain. He told how he would still, even after three years, pull over to the side of the road and cry in his car alone. Here these parents were each grieving — alone — unable to share their pain with the only other person in the world who could possibly understand the loss of their child. And then there are mothers who have no one with whom to share their sorrow because they kept the pregnancy, or birth of the child, a secret from everyone. Many of those mothers sadly suffer from feelings of regret and guilt, and grieve alone.

Janet Lucy, parishioner of Sacred Heart St. Francis de Sales in Bennington, remembers, “... the miscarriage of our fourth child was very difficult for both of us. The comments from the medical profession were no consolation. At six weeks along our baby was referred to as ‘tissue’ and we were told that ‘it was

probably sick anyway and therefore it was meant to be.’ Our hearts told us at the time of the miscarriage that our child was not an ‘it,’ but throughout this process called grief we have never given our fourth child a name. Though we loved deeply the gifts of the three lives that had been given to us, we felt the heaviness of loss of this precious life that we would never really come to know.”

Mass for Bereaved Parents

So why have a Mass in memory of these children, to honor the parents and allow a holy space for the grief to be acknowledged? The Eucharist provides a space for Catholics to come together. It provides

nourishment and consolation through the Liturgy of the Word. At the offertory time, the faithful are able to offer their own gifts, their children, their pain. As Jesus prepared for his own

offering in the Last Supper, he first comforted his disciples so they could continue on even after his own suffering and death. He provided them hope that life continues and their suffering now is only a phase of the kingdom. And then he offered them his body and blood to remember him always. Is it not fitting that as the time of sorrow brought the disciples to Jesus and Eucharist, that it is just as fitting that those who suffer loss be renewed through the same Eucharist?

Marilyn LaBarr and her husband Doug attended the Bereavement Mass for Parents at St. Michael Parish in Brattleboro last year. She explains, “To make the impact of the Mass understandable, I think I need to tell you a little about Russ (Russell Wayne Saunders). He was beautiful, inside and out. He was always smiling, always outgoing, always reaching out to people to help them in some way. He died, just short of his 19th birthday, in a car accident. Sometimes I wake up suddenly and it feels as if I just heard the doorbell ring. The shock of the policeman’s message washes over me and I feel like I am choking. That has been happening for all of the 21 years he has been gone. This year would have been his 40th birthday, but to me he will always be that happy, exuberant teenager. I have never stopped needing to be his mother. I measure everything in my life by whether it happened before or after he died.

“The year 2005 was very difficult. It marked the time that Russ had been gone more years than he had lived. When a friend told me about the bereavement Mass, it gave me something to look forward to. And everything about that service blessed me. Although I do not remember (the) exact words, (the) homily comforted and encouraged me. Doug, too, was touched by the entire service because he is my sympathetic ear and, especially, my loving shoulder to cry on — because the tears never cease no matter how many years have passed. I truly felt that the life of each lost child represented by those assembled was celebrated as a gift, however brief, to the parents, the family and

friends, and even to the whole world because no one who loses a child is ever the same person again. I believe that loss defines us and how we react to, or reach out to, everyone we ever encounter.”

Faith Brothers from Immaculate Heart of Mary initiated the first Mass for Bereaved Parents in Rutland five years ago. Faith explains, “The Mass for bereaved parents, grandparents, friends, etc., provides a form of solace that cannot be found elsewhere. Some people suffer in silence for incredible periods of time, refusing to talk about their sorrow to anyone. They won’t go to groups — they feel too vulnerable or embarrassed. They silently cry themselves to sleep each night. How do I know? I have been all of these people. The loss of a child never leaves us; they help make us who we are. After coming out of my grief of 30 years, I wanted to help others find their way through this journey.

“Our Children’s Hour’ Mass was named by Pat Dwinell, a parishioner who had recently lost her grandson. The Mass brings together people who are grieving from a recent loss as well as those whose children passed away years ago. Parents of any age who lose a child of any age grieve.

“Many times we find that, for some, this is the only time that they have acknowledged their loss in the presence of others. What better place, than in the welcoming arms of Jesus? Our Mass is the spiritual support that is often missing. Some have been angry with God, have stayed away from church and this Mass is a gentle invitation to return to the gentle shepherd who understands us when no one else does.”

Janet Lucy adds, “A bereavement Mass helps parents no matter the age of the child or how the child was lost, to grieve within the support of a loving community, to remember their lost child by name.”

If you are grieving the loss of a child, come to Mass on the Feast of All Saints, and know that you are not alone. This is an opportunity to affirm that the life that came through you continues on in the loving arms of our Savior.

•Margaret Wehrung, MA, CFLE, is the Director of Marriage, Family, & Respect Life Ministries for Vermont Catholic Charities.

Parental Notification Essay

Omitted from the list of Honorable Mention recipients Grades 7-9: **Paul Mahaffy** — grade 7, East Randolph; Sts. Donation & Rogation Parish, Randolph; homeschooled.



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