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Service for families of murder victims ignores Sandy

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Dec. 3, 2012
Hurricane Sandy
Viewpoint

Each of the 15 annual services for families of murder victims held in Brooklyn, N.Y., has followed a similar pattern. Each has been marked by a uniquely memorable event. The second service left the memory of a 10-year-old boy, dressed in his Sunday best, including brown shoes, who traveled alone by subway to represent his murdered brother. That boy is now 24. He cannot know how much we loved him.

Another service brought together a pair of stunningly beautiful women, one black, the other white, one Protestant, the other Catholic, who shared photos of their recently killed sons. Both handsome young men wore tuxedoes and smiles. The women comforted one another.

What no one could have anticipated last year was the heart-wrenching display of near despair coming from a woman in a wheelchair who helplessly witnessed the murder of her son, her caregiver, in their apartment.

What no one expected this year was Hurricane Sandy. By the morning of Oct. 28, New York City's Mayor Michael Bloomberg had announced public transportation would shut down at 7 p.m. Ten of the 22 registered families called to cancel. The remaining 12, totaling about 40 family members, joined our Cherish Life Circle participants. Several of the victims' relatives come every year. One, a mother of a murdered son, said she would have swum through the streets to get to us if need be.

What attendees find each year is a welcome from the Cherish Life Circle. This group, created in 1993 to oppose the death penalty, is made up of 12 individuals: men and women lay, clergy and religious. They partner with Safe Horizon to identify and invite people whose loved ones have been murdered. Vilma Torres, director of Safe Horizon's New York City Family Justice Center, makes the contacts. For the past 12 years the group has gathered in the Convent of Mercy's auditorium for refreshments and sharing of stories before proceeding to the exquisitely beautiful chapel, a locus of prayer since 1894. Mercy Srs. Mary Winifred Ceravola and Mary Joanne Deegan provide the booklets containing the hymns and prayers. Fr. Frank Shannon, pastor of a very large, poor, Spanish-speaking parish, has in recent years replaced Mercy Sr. Sharon Kelly as organist because Sister Sharon now ministers in New Jersey.

Cherish Life Circle members provide the refreshments, flowers, paper goods and table decorations for the auditorium and are responsible for leading different parts of the service. One translates into Spanish key remarks and prayers in the auditorium and chapel.

Brightly colored tablecloths, cookies, coffee for the adults and juice boxes for the children are provided. All of this is predictably ritualized.

The oncoming storm was not the only surprise. On a much more pleasant note, this year Kevin Doyle, New York state's last capital defender, arrived with his wife, Mary Sullivan, to spread a feast of Irish soda bread he

himself had baked. Kevin's recent bout with lymphoma has placed limits on his energy, so, after filling the room with his own good cheer and best wishes, he and Mary paid a visit to the chapel and went on their way. Our Cherish Life Circle members and guests concurred in rating the bread a 10. One member asked for the recipe, describing it as "heavenly."

Each service provides a Scripture reflection by someone who has lost a relative to violence. Past speakers have included a prominent writer, Antoinette Bosco, whose book, *Choosing Mercy*, describes the murder of her son and daughter-in-law. The Rev. Walter Everett spoke of the reconciling bond he has with his son's murderer. This year's speaker was Jesuit Fr. Matt Malone, the new editor in chief of *America* magazine. Matt's 20-year-old cousin was murdered by a man who then killed himself. Matt, like those who preceded him, touched the hearts of his hearers with his journey from rage to forgiveness.

Michael Moran, who asked for Doyle's recipe, probably spoke for many when he wrote that the "gathering was once again an inspiring, yet haunting experience."

Throughout this year we will remember the family members who, wearing the names of their murdered loved ones, were escorted from their seats to the sanctuary. Each deposited in a large glass bowl a message written to their loved one. Then, accepting a red carnation, they took their places in the sanctuary for a blessing.

They prayed, "In the blowing of the wind and the chill of winter, we will remember them."

After singing the closing hymn, "Amazing Grace," with spirits bolstered by the day's experience, they left for trains and buses to get home before city transportation shut down. All have endured emotional storms more devastating and lasting than the one that threatened the city.

And we, safe on the shore of certainty, bless them and God for allowing us to offer the work of mercy: comfort for the afflicted.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo is broadcaster and author. Her online column, "Conversations with Camille," appears on the *NCR* website on Tuesdays at NCRonline.org/blogs/conversations-sr-camille.]

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