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A parish, like a family, is made of woven lives

Patrick T. Reardon | Jul. 6, 2013
Essay

The baby crawled along the carpet in an open area in the back of church. She was dressed in a celebration of white and red horizontal stripes, and she was happy.

She was delighted at her newfound ability to get from here to there. She smiled and giggled.

A few steps away was Ann, who was dying.

It was near the end of the 10 a.m. Sunday Mass at our parish, St. Gertrude, on the far north side of Chicago. It was a special Mass to honor Ann, the longtime religious education director who, six months earlier, had been struck down with a vicious cancer.

Earlier, after the Gospel reading, dozens of children throughout the church had walked, ran and skipped up the aisles to the altar and gone through a side door into the rectory for Kid's Word. That's a weekly age-appropriate lesson in faith that the children receive on their own while their parents and older siblings take in the homily. Ann instituted Kid's Word years ago.

But this Sunday, by the time of the Gospel reading, Ann wasn't yet in church.

And she wasn't there when our pastor preached about all the great work she had done while on the parish staff.

Part of that work was the creation of a mobile under the spotlight that shines down from the ceiling onto the baptismal font and the carpeted area in the back of church. Over the years, various versions of the mobile have appeared in that space, usually made out of cards or paper figures fashioned, at Ann's direction, by the children of, say, the holy Communion class or the confirmation class.

Often, the mobile and its parts would swing and rotate under the spotlight, creating the playful movement of merry shadows on the carpet. Children would gravitate to that spot to add their own joyful dances.

It had become a special spot, the pastor said, a kind of sacred portal between the people of St. Gertrude and those who have gone before us.

This was a special Mass. But, of course, every Mass is special.

Go into St. Gertrude on any Sunday at 10 a.m., and you'll find some little kids crawling on the carpet or dancing under the mobile or fidgeting in the pews.

We all knew on that Sunday that Ann was gravely ill. But, on any given Sunday, there's likely to be someone, maybe several people, grappling with serious disease and even consciously aware of the nearness of death.

At one of the weekend Masses, you're likely to see the white-haired woman whom my daughter calls, with awe

and deep respect, "the angel." That's because she cares so well, so gently, so wholeheartedly for her developmentally disabled adult son and her ailing husband.

On any Sunday, people will come to church angry, or desolate, or bewildered. Maybe they'll hear a kind word from someone to ease their pain. Maybe they'll receive a smile at the kiss of peace.

Perhaps it's enough that they are able to be with the community, with their community. To not feel alone.

On Sept. 11, 2001, the people of St. Gertrude gathered together in the evening to pray. Later, few could recall the prayers said or songs sung at the service. They remembered the feeling of sharing their sadness and fears together. I suspect every parish across the nation came together in the same way on that day.

Look around the church at a weekend Mass, and you'll see people who are active in the parish life. That couple there, they ran the last fundraising campaign. The woman by herself near the front heads the adult education committee. Several men and women in the choir help every year to put on the parish play.

All around the church, too, are quieter members of the St. Gertrude faith family. They don't head any organizations and don't volunteer much, if at all. Yet, they are just as essential to the fabric of the community.

St. Gertrude is blessed to be in the most diverse neighborhood in Chicago, and the people in the pews reflect that. There are many shades of color -- from the deepest dark brown to the whiter-than-white paleness of my daughter, showing her Irish heritage.

There are many economic levels represented, too. Blue-collar workers and unemployed clerks. Company presidents and social workers. Lawyers, cops and waiters.

Single people -- some young and just starting out, some elderly -- are in the pews. And couples of all sorts. And families -- those headed by single parents, by gay partners, by the traditional husband and wife.

Any parish is like this. Maybe not in the great diversity, but, certainly, any parish is a mix of people at various stages of their lives and in wide variety of emotional states. Like any family.

Every Mass is special because it brings together some portion of the parish to pray together and share together their faith.

Each parish member is special, too. Each is a tile in the mosaic that makes up the community. Each is a thread in the woven lives of the faith family.

Each -- in his or her strivings to infuse life with meaning through loving others -- is an angel.

The baby crawling along the carpet was special. So was Ann.

On that Sunday, weak and struggling with pain, she got to church midway through the service. As the Mass neared its end, she took a seat on a high chair next to the baptismal font. Above her was the latest version of the mobile that was her creation.

Our pastor walked down the main aisle to be with her and give her a final benediction. Friends and family surrounded and supported her. Her colleagues from the parish staff clustered around. The rest of the congregation filled the back of church or took part from their pews.

Handed a microphone, Ann spoke in a thin, constrained voice about how important the St. Gertrude faith community had been in her life and the life of her family.

Our pastor told her how important she had been to the people of St. Gertrude.

Then, he raised his arms, and her colleagues on the staff raised their arms, and her family and friends, and the rest of the people in the church.

And we blessed Ann.

Ten days later, Peter, our pastoral associate, sent out an email with the subject heading "May the angels lead her into paradise ?"

Ann was gone.

But, of course, she wasn't gone. She had woven her life so deeply into the fabric of the St. Gertrude faith family that she would never cease to be a part of the community.

That's the nature of a parish. The bond of sharing our faith together transcends differences in income, political outlook, sexual orientation and cultural background. It transcends death.

We are linked together with all the people who have ever joined to worship and pray at St. Gertrude. And with all the people who, over the past two millennia, have sought to live the message of Jesus. And with all people in history who have opted for love instead of fear.

The baby crawling on the carpet and delighting in the practice of her new skill had no awareness of the sorrowful drama being enacted a few feet from her. All she knew was that, in that sacred space, she was in a community that was warm and caring.

She'll never meet Ann. But as she weaves her faith and her life into the St. Gertrude faith family, she will.

[Patrick T. Reardon is the author of *Love Never Fails: Spiritual Reflections for Dads of All Ages*.]

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