

Praying the Prodigals Home

By Leslie M. Nordin
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OLATHE - When Mary Ann Gardner's child left the church, she did just what any red-blooded Catholic mother would do: fumed and fretted, wept and wailed, blamed herself and blamed society. This couldn't be happening to her - not to someone who had taught in a parochial school, not to mention 17 years of CCD.

And it couldn't be this particular child -not the one who never sat down to a meal without grace; not the one who was so proud of becoming an Ad Altari Dei Eagle Scout; not the one who attended Catholic schools up to and including college. Not the child she thought she knew so well. But it had happened. And the child was grown.

"You can't reason with a grown child who doesn't want to listen," Gardner said, "but it broke my heart." She had many long and despairing conversations with her husband, Bob, about the problem. Nothing seemed to help.

So she did the only thing she knew to do - she prayed. She had always had a special devotion to Our Lady of Sorrows, and she and her husband had always prayed together about all sorts of things throughout their married life. Now they said the rosary daily for their child, starting a novena that was supposed to last 54 days. It is still going strong five years later.

But it didn't stop there; Gardner began speaking out on the subject. At first she was nervous, and fought the urge to share her concerns.

"I wasn't brought up to wash my dirty clothes in public," she said, "but I felt as though God was pushing me to tell my story." Today when she talks, Gardner holds a small wooden replica of an oar in her hand. Stamped on the wood are words in Pope John Paul II's handwriting: "Be not afraid. Put out into the deep. Christ is with you." The oar was given to her by a Polish friend, who was given several of them by a Dominican priest she met on a visit to her homeland.

"It gives me great peace, just holding it while I talk," said Gardner. And those who come to listen to her say she gives them a sense of peace, too, as well as hope. You see, the child who almost led her to despair, is now back in the fold and about to marry a staunch Catholic.

The more Gardner shared her experience with her friends and acquaintances and absorbed their feedback, the more she began to realize that children leaving the church had become an epidemic.



And for each prodigal, there were parents and grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins who were grieving.

So Gardner and a handful of friends decided to begin praying the rosary every Friday afternoon at Prince of Peace Church in Olathe. Gardner also started a Web site (MarianMantle.com), which has members saying the rosary for prodigals in places as far-flung as New York and Florida, Australia and Singapore.

As interest grew, Gardner utilized her teaching and writing background to address the topic in print. To date, she has authored "A Parent's Way of the Cross," "A Parent's Rosary Novena to Our Lady of Sorrows" and a prayer card entitled "A Parent's Litany," all of which proudly bear the imprimatur of Archbishop James P. Keleher of the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas. Her latest work is a pamphlet of poetry on the rosary entitled "Through Her Eyes."

The purpose of the whole movement, said Gardner, is twofold: first, to bring peace to the hurting relatives and friends; and second, to pray for the prodigals that they may find their way back to the sacraments.

People who have heard her speak of turning children over to God, "who loves them better than we do," are impressed. Bill Loechler and his wife Jennifer, who met Gardner through the Sanctuary of Hope in Kansas City, Kan., and attended the kickoff meeting of the program at her home. Loechler said it was very helpful to hear that other parents are in the same boat and that we need to put our children in God's hands.

Susan Buck, religious education director of St. Patrick Parish in Kansas City, Kan., also attended the kickoff meeting at the Gardners' home and later invited Gardner to speak after a first Saturday Mass at St. Patrick.

"I was very impressed with her sincerity and her concern for parents whose children had left the faith," Buck said.

A few weeks ago Karen Hillerman heard Gardner speak to a group at St. John LaLande Parish in Blue Springs, Mo. She told them the second largest religious group in this country is non-practicing Catholics.

"I just sat there and kept nodding my head while she talked," Hillerman said. "It was so nice to have the reinforcement that they really don't listen to you and you have to turn them over to Christ."

Gardner and her husband tried all kinds of things as they struggled with their son's decision to leave the church, "but the biggest change is in me," she said. "We had to accept the fact that we couldn't fix everything - but we could change ourselves. That's when we turned our children over to God."

"It's time we stopped listening to people who told us it's hopeless and we are helpless, and start listening to God who tells us that in him anything is possible," she added.