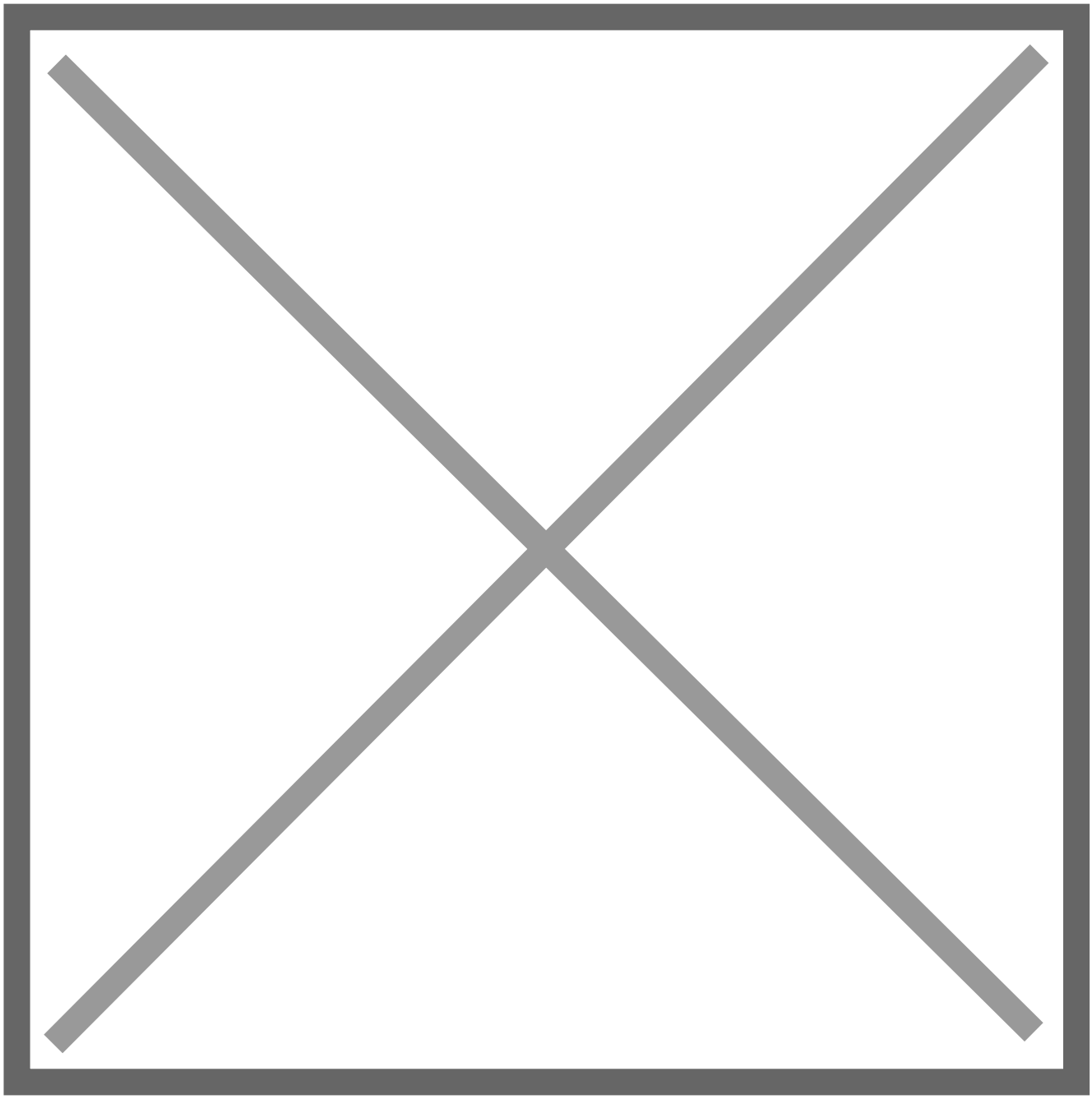
Opinion
Spirituality



The candles at Montmartre's Sacré-Coeur in Paris (Photo by Mary Ann McGivern)



by Mary Ann McGivern

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February 28, 2018
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I just was on a vacation to Paris — a wondrous trip. I visited a church, Montmartre's Sacré-Coeur in Paris and I lit a candle. Traveling with my mother, we always lit a candle for my father and my two deceased brothers. Now I named Mom as well. And then I said to them, David, your son and brother, my brother, too, is sick. He has lymphoma. Get on the stick. Intercede for him.

Thinking of David, I thought right away of Nathan, the son of a dear friend who was just diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. I lit another candle for Nathan's deceased father and brother and then I added on Leo's parents and my friend's parents, even though I didn't know their names, and I said to the lot of them, get on the stick. Intercede for Nathan.

My traveling companion Paulette and I began a candle-lighting campaign church to church, calling on our own deceased family members and the families of Nathan and of Eldon and Ana as well — our friends who are seriously ill, for whom we have been asked to pray.

In the midst of this solemn candle lighting we laughed again and again. We were enlisting, in old-fashioned terms, the army of the church triumphant. We were calling on all our family saints to work miracles. It was an audacious action, and our prayers and the pressure we were trying to put on these family saints gave us hope and moments of joy. We felt a union with so many people we love.

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At Notre-Dame, I knelt at the small altar that holds the blessed sacrament. I knelt to pray, but quickly I got to wondering about our candle-lighting endeavor. How does the intercession of saints work? How does prayer work? Who is this God we are calling on?

I took a breath and a mental step back. God is love. I know that. Our practice of lighting candles is a practice of love. That's enough to know.

[Mary Ann McGivern, a Sister of Loretto, works with people who have felony convictions and advocates for criminal justice.]