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Oxford High School students and staff attend Mass Nov. 30, 2021, at St. Joseph Church in Lake Orion, Mich. (CNS photo/Michael Stechschulte, Detroit Catholic)

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Lake Orion, Mich. — December 1, 2021

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Many were not Catholic, but they arrived at St. Joseph Catholic Church the night of Nov. 30 nonetheless — first a trickle, then a steady stream.

Soon, a sea of varsity jackets and sweatshirts emblazoned with Oxford High School's mascot, the Wildcats, overwhelmed the vestibule of the Lake Orion church.

Hugs were exchanged and cathartic tears were shed. Friends separated in fear hours earlier reunited, and parents consoled one another in their grief.

Earlier in the day, a gunman — alleged by authorities to be a 15-year-old Oxford High sophomore — took the lives of three Oxford students and wounded eight other people in the worst school shooting in Michigan history.

As the community came together at St. Joseph, the closest Catholic parish to Oxford, just 4.4 miles away in neighboring Lake Orion, the parish's regularly scheduled Tuesday evening liturgy became an impromptu occasion of healing for a community that will need plenty of it in the coming weeks and months.

"This is truly what a strong community does. We come forth. We bond together. We hug one another," Father Jim Kean, pastor of St. Joseph, told the nearly 1,000 parents, students, parishioners and community members who gathered for the Mass. "We turn to those words that on a day like today aren't particularly easy to say: 'I love you.' 'How are you?' 'Are you OK?'"

Even as the Mass was celebrated, lights and sirens could be seen and heard outside as the investigation into the shooting continued to unfold.

Late into the evening, news reports indicated authorities were raiding the downtown Oxford home of the alleged suspect, who was taken into custody shortly after the shooting.

Authorities responded to multiple 911 calls around 12:50 p.m. at the public high school, located about 45 miles north of Detroit in northern Oakland County, as reports of an active shooter began to leak out into the community.

According to police, the suspect — who has not yet been identified publicly — fired 15 to 20 rounds from a semiautomatic handgun in approximately five minutes before surrendering to authorities.

Authorities later identified the three students killed as 14-year-old Hana St. Juliana, 17-year-old Madisyn Baldwin and 16-year-old Tate Myre. The eight others wounded — including seven students and a teacher — were transported to nearby hospitals. Three remained in critical condition early Dec. 1.

As panicked parents frantically tried reaching their children at the school, many turned to social media for information.

John Wurgess, who attended the Mass at St. Joseph, said his daughter, an Oxford High student, was home from school Nov. 30 after breaking up with her boyfriend.

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"Her and I were in the living room talking when she looked at her phone and saw what was going on," a visibly shaken Wurgess, who isn't Catholic but attended the Mass out of a sense of solidarity with the community, told Detroit Catholic, newspaper of the Archdiocese of Detroit.

Wurgess said a fellow parent was having difficulty reaching his own daughter, one of Wurgess' daughter's friends, and asked for help. After a few text messages, the girl was discovered to be safe, having hidden in a closet at the school.

"It's crazy what's going on. For this to hit our community is just devastating," Wurgess said. "We're gonna have to stick together. We've got to find a way to keep our kids safe."

In the aftermath of the shooting, students were evacuated to a nearby Meijer supermarket, which subsequently closed to customers and served as a hub for parents to pick up their children.

After hearing of the shooting, Father John Carlin, associate pastor at St. Joseph — which locked down its own grade school as a precaution — went to the supermarket to offer whatever spiritual and emotional support he could.

"Something told me as a priest, as a father to the community, that I was supposed to be there," said Father Carlin, who celebrated the Nov. 30 Mass.

During his homily, Father Carlin consoled students and families, assuring them that God hears their prayers and cries and that nothing is stronger than Jesus' victory over death.

"Every time we experience a loss of friends or loved ones or something we don't understand, the Lord wants not only to walk with us in that darkness, but to let us know that He is there," Father Carlin said. "He's not going anywhere, and He never will."

After the liturgy, several remained inside the parish for eucharistic adoration, while Father Kean, Father Carlin and clergy from St. Joseph counseled students, parents and parishioners and offered confessions to those who wanted it.

At the end of the Mass, Father Kean acknowledged the difficulty of facing friends and loved ones in the aftermath of a tragedy, even mustering the courage to say, "I love you."

"We recognize that these words are hard because of the love we feel surrounding us," Father Kean said as students in the congregation broke down in tears. "Even simple gestures, when people extend their thanks and appreciation to you or let you know that they're thinking of you, those waves of emotion can hit you again."

"We recognize that these words are hard because of the love we feel surrounding us," Father Kean said.

Father Kean said he received a call from Detroit Archbishop Allen H. Vigneron, who was audibly concerned for the community's well-being and sent his prayers for the victims and their families. statement

"As Archbishop Vigneron spoke to me, you could hear the emotion catching up with him a bit," Father Kean said. "But it brings us together to have that emotion. It gives us a fuller sense of comfort to know that so many are praying for us, and though they are far away in distance, they're near to our hearts."

Shortly after news of the shooting, Archbishop Vigneron said in a statement: "I am heartbroken to hear of the horrific tragedy at Oxford High School. On behalf of the clergy, religious, and faithful of the Archdiocese of Detroit, I offer heartfelt prayers for the victims, their families, and all those affected in our community.

"May Our Blessed Mother wrap all those wounded — physically, emotionally or spiritually— in her loving mantle and offer them consolation in the difficult days ahead."

Among those praying was Gage Harris, an alumnus of St. Joseph School who has friends in the Oxford community. Harris, now a sophomore in college, said his brother knew one of the victims, Myre, a member of the football team.

"My heart goes out to the families that are suffering right now," Harris said. "And I hope that they can get through this because this is a really tough time for our community."

"We're strong. We're bonding. We're here for one another," Harris added. "When you see people here praying for you, it gives you that hope back. Even when you feel like everything is gone, you know that you have something to turn to and that God is always there, even when it's super dark. You always have that light that God gives you."