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"I could really use my prayers right now. My school is getting shot up."

The text message arrived at 10:39 a.m. Sept. 4 on youth minister Tania Martinez's phone.

Many of her teen leaders at St. Matthew Church in Winder were caught up in the shooting at nearby Apalachee High School. One sent the message.

Martinez knows the high school community. Two of her children graduated from the school, and another attends middle school on the shared campus. Holding back emotions, she called the day "surreal."

Colt Gray, a 14-year-old student at the Barrow County school, is accused of killing two students and two teachers using a military-style rifle. He was taken into custody the day of the shooting and charged the next day with four counts of felony murder. He was arraigned Sept. 6 and is expected to be tried as an adult.

The students who were killed were Mason Schermerhorn and Christian Angulo, both 14, and the educators were Richard Aspinwall and Cristina Irimie, reported the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. Gray is also accused of wounding nine others in the shooting spree.

The teen's father, Colin Gray, 54, was arrested Sept. 5 and has been charged with four counts of involuntary manslaughter, two counts of second-degree murder and eight counts of cruelty to children. The elder Gray was also arraigned Sept. 6, a few hours after his son in the same courtroom. Both remain in jail.

According to several law enforcement officials, the gun used in the shootings, a black AR-15 semi-automatic rifle, was given to the teen by his father as a Christmas gift in 2023. Months earlier, Colin Gray had assured law enforcement investigating a tip that the teen did not have unsupervised access to guns.

In a statement issued late Sept. 4, Archbishop Gregory J. Hartmayer of Atlanta, joined by the archdiocese's auxiliary bishops, said, "Our hearts ache for the lives that have been so cruelly cut short by this devastating tragedy."

"We grieve and pray with those who lost children and loved ones. We ask God for healing and strength for those who have been injured," they said. "And we invoke God's blessing on our first responders and medical personnel, especially during this

traumatic time."

The bishops called the shooting "another grim reminder" that taking additional steps to prevent gun violence "cannot wait for another tragedy to happen."

"Once again, we implore elected officials to work together, regardless of political or religious affiliation, to enact laws and provide services that will prevent the repetition of such tragedies," they said.

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For the rest of the day of the shooting, Martinez's phone pinged with text messages as young people who worship at the parish checked in and consoled each other. Students have been in shock over the events and are trying to process what happened, she said.

The parish's usual Wednesday evening Mass draws between 40 and 50 people. Hours after the tragedy, some 100 believers in grief and shock found support with each other as families with young people filled the pews. Father Gilbert Exumé, the pastor, shared a message of comfort with those attending.

A community vigil was also held at Jug Tavern Park in Winder the same evening. Winder is located about 50 miles northeast of Atlanta.

Martinez's goal in the immediate days after the shooting is to let families and teens know the faith community is there for them, offering support in any way they need. The church community wants to "let everybody know the doors are open. We're here for them," she said. No person needs to mourn by themselves or think they are alone, she said.

Martinez told The Georgia Bulletin, Atlanta's archdiocesan newspaper, that she wants all the young people to know of "God's love and grace, and we are not alone."

Via text messages, she is reminding the youth of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "Fear not, for I am with you."