News



Debra Tice and her son Simon Robert pray during a Vigil Mass Dec. 15 at Holy Trinity Church in Washington. (NCR photo/Anthony Peltier)



by Camillo Barone

NCR staff reporter

View Author Profile
cbarone@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Washington — December 17, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

At the beginning of the Vigil Mass at Holy Trinity Church on Saturday, Jesuit Fr. Jack Dennis stepped down from the altar and stood by the pew where Debra Tice was sitting with one of her sons.

"We have here today at our church Mrs. Debra Tice," said Dennis, the parochial vicar and Mass presider. "Her son Austin, has been — as you know, you all read the papers — a captive in Syria since 2012, and so our Mass intention today is for your son, Austin, and for all those who are unjustly imprisoned." The congregation burst into a long applause.

"My faith! My faith is everything," said Debra Tice, smiling brightly during an exclusive interview after Mass with the National Catholic Reporter.

Tice discussed how her faith has been what she said was the greatest source of strength and hope during her 12-year effort to find her son. In her darkest hours during her son's disappearance, Tice said, she has turned to the Eucharist. "If you're famished, you can have the body of Christ every day," Tice said.

Over a dinner of salad and tap water, Tice discussed her efforts to find her son, how her Catholic faith has sustained her spiritually and emotionally, and how the top Roman Catholic official in Syria became her supporter, spiritual adviser and close friend.



Debra Tice gives Jesuit Fr. Kevin Gillespie a magnet with a picture of her son Austin, before a Vigil Mass Dec. 15 at Holy Trinity Church. Her son Simon Robert is pictured behind her. (NCR photo/Anthony Peltier)

Debra Tice — an evangelical Christian who converted to Catholicism in 1999 — attended the Jesuit church in Georgetown on Dec. 14 with her son, Simon Robert. She was in Washington, D.C., with her husband Marc and family to meet with officials and media about the search for Austin.

Austin is an alumnus of nearby Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service in Washington, and he is still enrolled as a student at the Georgetown University Law Center. (She joked with Holy Trinity parishioners after Mass that he is a "14L" student, meaning he is in his 14th year of law school.)

A freelance journalist and Marine veteran, Austin Tice disappeared in 2012 while freelance reporting on the Syrian civil war for The Washington Post, the McClatchy news organization and other publications.

Tice was wearing a green T-shirt that read "Free My Son" on the front and "Bring Austin Tice Home — Family is Everything" on the back. Multiple parishioners stopped to shake Tice's hand, after Mass, encouraging her, asking her for news about her son, and reassuring her they were praying for him and his return.

> 'We're called to pray for everyone, and his captors are human, and all humans are made in the image of God. That is God's own proclamation. We don't get to choose.'
> —Debra Tice
>
> Tweet this

Before Mass, Holy Trinity Church pastor Fr. Kevin Gillespie grabbed her hand and hugged her. Tice gave the Jesuit a magnet with a picture of Austin and this notation: "A Reminder to Pray for Austin, for his captors, for all those missing and displaced, for families longing to see their loved one again, for an end to strife and the beginning of healing in Syria and throughout the world."

Four thousand of the magnets have been given away, Tice said.

"We're called to pray for everyone, and his captors are human, and all humans are made in the image of God," Tice said. "That is God's own proclamation. We don't get to choose. We don't get to sort them out, all in the image of God. All deserve prayer."

Austin, while not a person of faith, always showed deep respect for his mother's convictions, she said. "He was so proud of me for making the decision to convert," Tice said.



A magnet displays a picture of Debra Tice's son Austin. Austin Tice disappeared in 2012 while freelance reporting on the Syrian civil war. (NCR photo/Anthony Peltier)

Though he never converted to Catholicism, Austin's early exposure to Scripture left a lasting impression. When he was homeschooled, Debra said he memorized the entire Gospel of John, numerous Psalms and Proverbs, and he held a particular fascination with the Book of Revelation.

When he started college, like a lot of other students, he "pretty much became agnostic," Tice said with a chuckle. But his connection to faith resurfaced while leading Marines in Iraq. "He would call me and say, 'Mom, Private So-and-So would like you to pray about this,' " she said. "His faith is still very real, very real."

In 2014, Debra said she spent three and a half months living in Damascus, Syria, searching for Austin. Immersing herself in the community of the internally displaced, she sought solace and support in a nearby Catholic parish — the last in Damascus to offer Mass in English. It was a fragile place of worship amid the chaos of conflict.

"The reason it had a Mass in English was because of the Filipino and Arabic workers," she said.

During her time there, she forged a meaningful bond with Cardinal Mario Zenari, the apostolic nuncio to Syria. "I went to his nunciature, and we just became very close," she said. The cardinal, understanding her grief and determination, welcomed her into his chapel to pray, often standing quietly outside the door while she sought spiritual strength.

"When I was praying, he would say, 'We should have coffee.' "



Cardinal Mario Zenari, apostolic nuncio to Syria, is pictured with Debra Tice. (Courtesy of Debra Tice)

This small gesture evolved into a lasting friendship, one rooted in faith and mutual resolve.

"He continues to be a really close friend, and whenever he comes to the United States, I go to wherever he is so that we can see each other, pray together, and make a plan to try to get Austin home," Tice said.

Today, Tice affectionately calls Zenari "my nuncio."

"I am a very strong woman," she said. "He said, 'Prudence, prudence, Mrs. Tice.' It was all he needed to say."

While on another trip to Beirut, in 2013, Tice recalled spotting on an airport shuttle bus, nearly empty, a man in holy robes sitting alone. "I didn't know what he was," she said, "so I just stood there." She asked him to scooch over, unaware that this simple interaction would forge a powerful connection. The man, who identified himself as a Syriac Orthodox, listened carefully as Tice told her story.

That man later became the patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, Ignatius Aphrem II, and when Tice attended his inauguration Mass in Damascus in 2014 with Zenari, he warmly greeted her.

"I will always scooch over for you," he told her, a reference to their first meeting. "I will do anything for your son. We will get him back."

Advertisement

Reflecting on her time in Damascus, Tice spoke of seeing the Catholic Church as a true family for the first time — one united in faith despite its diverse rites and beliefs.

"There's Roman Catholics, there's Orthodox, there's Syriac, there's Maronites. It didn't matter what your hat looked like. It was the Catholic Church," she said. Filipinos in the congregation hosted large feasts every Sunday despite the war,

welcoming anyone who wished to come, she said.

After the fall of the regime of Bashar Assad in Syria on Dec. 8, Syrian rebels have made a public offer to assist the U.S. in the search for Austin Tice. The political wing of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS, a group now governing parts of Syria, announced through the messaging platform Telegram that it is willing to "cooperate directly" with U.S. authorities. The statement said that the group is already engaged in the search, describing it as ongoing.



As Debra Tice listens, Jesuit Fr. Jack Dennis reads the Gospel at Mass Dec. 15 at Holy Trinity Church in Washington. (NCR photo/Anthony Peltier)

The development has been cautiously welcomed by Tice's family, who have grown increasingly vocal about their dissatisfaction with what they perceive as a lack of decisive action from the Biden administration, urging the U.S. government to seize the opportunity presented by HTS's outreach.

While in Washington, Tice appeared on NBC's "Meet the Press" in which she discussed her optimism with the downfall of the Assad regime. In the Dec. 15 interview, Tice said that "the U.S. government has made the decision that they're not going into Damascus. So, my feeling is, if they don't want to be there, they shouldn't be there. And the people that are there are the people that are determined."

Host Kristen Welker asked Tice if she thought the U.S. government should be in Syria, Tice smiled, saying, "What do you think?"

After a long pause, Welker replied: "We'll take your silence as your answer, there."

The Biden administration has been in direct contact with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Saturday.

In August 2024, Debra Tice discovered the U.S. government has had for some time intelligence about her son's detention. "They denied, they acted like they didn't know anything," she said. With Damascus now under Hayat Tahrir al-Sham control, she said her focus has shifted to regional powers like Turkey and Jordan. She also noted that President-elect Donald Trump has committed to bringing Austin home.

Tice fondly recalls her son Austin's vibrant personality, his booming voice, and infectious smile. "He's so loud and he has such a great smile," she said. She recalled memories of playful moments, like when Austin would wrap his arms around her and twirl her in the air.

Despite the pain of his absence, Tice said her faith remains unshakable. She asks that anyone with even a shred of information to come forward. She said she hopes that someone, perhaps a parishioner in Damascus, will care for Austin and bring him home.

But there is one request that stands above the rest. "The first thing I would ask is for their prayers."

During the prayers of the faithful at Mass at Holy Trinity, a lector offered a petition: "Let us pray for those unjustly held in prisons, and persons missing, in Syria, namely Austin Tice. May the leaders of the nations act so that justice is realized and all may be united with their loved ones."

Debra Tice grabbed the hand of her son, Simon Robert, and squeezed it tightly, as the congregation sang the response, "Come, O Lord, and set us free."