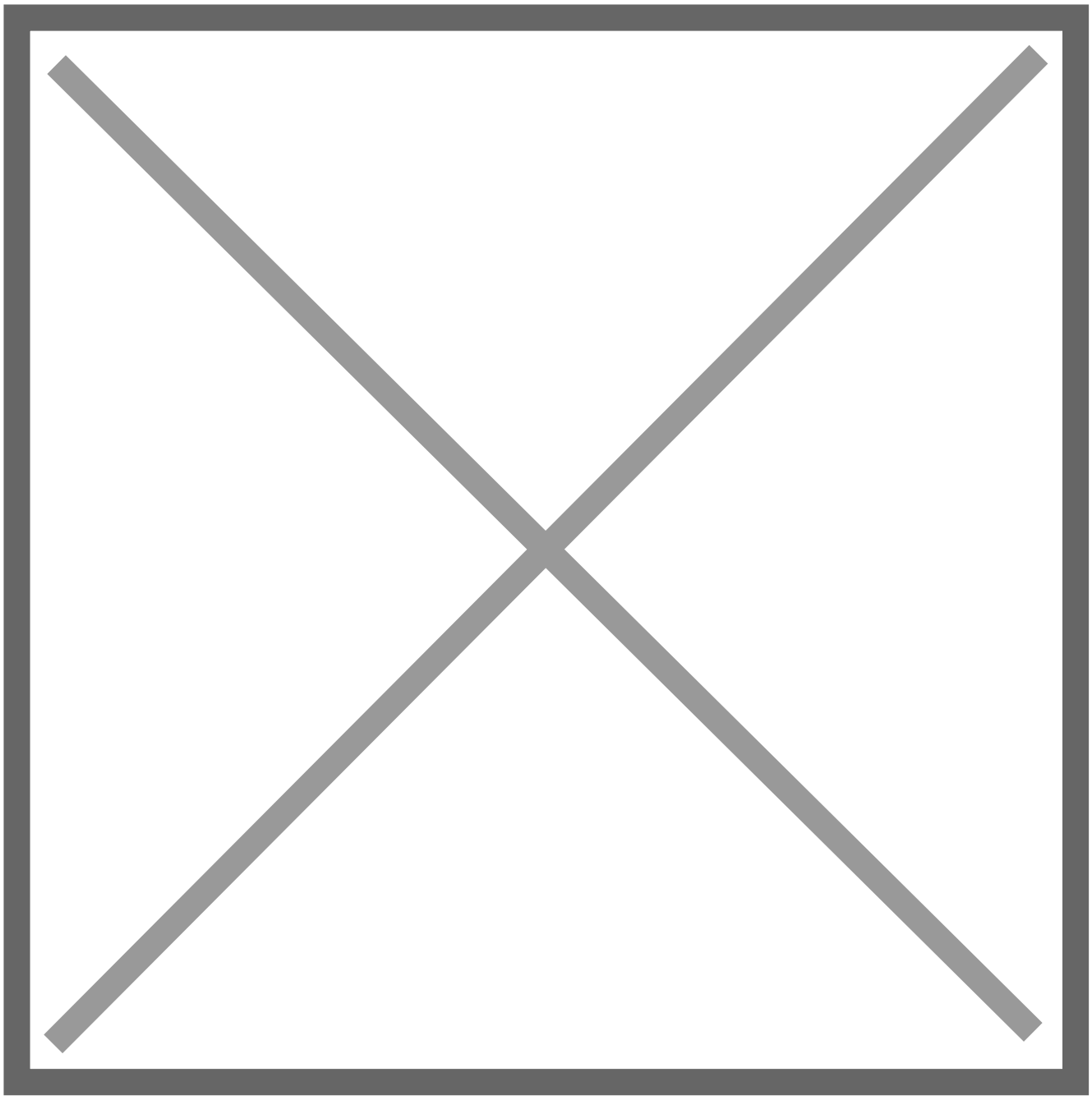
News



Mollie and Jesse Merkel address those gathered at Annunciation Catholic School in Minneapolis Jan. 10, 2026, for FletcherFest in honor of their son Fletcher, who died in an Aug. 27, 2025, shooting during an all-school Mass at Annunciation Church in south Minneapolis. The event featured food, games and socializing as people celebrated Fletcher's life. (OSV News/The Catholic Spirit/Dave Hrbacek)

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Minneapolis — January 15, 2026
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On the stage of Annunciation Catholic School's auditorium in Minneapolis, Jesse and Mollie Merkel walked to the podium to express their gratitude for the community that filled the space in front of them.

Looking out, they saw people who had supported them since day one, Jesse Merkel said.

The auditorium — which was used to celebrate Mass for nearly five months after an Aug. 27, 2025, shooting during an all-school Mass took the lives of the Merkels' 8-year-old son, Fletcher, and 10-year-old Harper Moyski — was filled Jan. 10 with Annunciation parents and community members.

Many in the crowd wore T-shirts bearing Fletcher's and Harper's names along with the words "Joy" and "Hope."

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"I'm not surprised to see those people because we're a community together, and God forbid it was somebody else, Mollie and I would have been out there in the crowd," Jesse Merkel said after he and his wife addressed those gathered.

"That's just how this community works. We're extremely thankful for them being here," he told The Catholic Spirit, newspaper of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and

Minneapolis.

"We know that they're not going anywhere," Mollie Merkel said. "This isn't just for today. It's for the rest of our lives."

That day, they were there to celebrate FletcherFest, a gathering the Merkels organized as they and the community they cherish move forward in hope and love from the tragedy experienced by so many students, teachers and staff at the Mass. Jesse and Mollie said they hope to remember Fletcher as he lived, not as he died.

"We want to focus on who he was, what his life was," Mollie said. "Bringing people together (so) that his joy and hope and happiness might live on."

Many of Fletcher's favorite things were featured at FletcherFest, which was celebrated from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. with sports, ice cream, art, pizza and a reptile show. Children bustled about for face painting, games and a blow-up slide.

"Most importantly, his friends, family, classmates, teachers and community," Mollie said. She said the entire Merkel family, especially Fletcher, has loved this community, which is why she and her husband launched the Fletcher Merkel Memorial Endowment Fund through the Catholic Community Foundation of Minnesota in St. Paul.

Money from the fund will be awarded annually to recipients "who would likely not be able to attend this wonderful school, Annunciation, otherwise," Mollie said. "We are committed to providing this scholarship not just for one year, but rather for their entire journey at Annunciation. We know that this is what Fletcher would have wanted. This was his second home. These are his people. This is also our second home, and these are our people."

Mollie said Fletcher was excited every day to get out of bed and go to school at Annunciation. He put on his uniform — sometimes backwards — and even if they brushed his hair, they knew it would stick up in what they called "Fletcher hair," Mollie said.

One of his friends was Finnegan Stommes, a student at Annunciation a year younger than Fletcher. Finnegan's parents, Molly and Matt Stommes, are friends with the Merkels. Molly Stommes described Mollie Merkel as "a great collector of friends."

The past three summers, the families vacationed together at a cabin in Grandview.

"Finnegan loves fishing because of Fletcher," Matt Stommes told The Catholic Spirit. "He probably spent most of his first days fishing with Fletcher. … Most of those minutes and hours and days of fishing when he learned how to fish, he was with Fletcher. It's kind of bittersweet to be able to go fishing again because his first days of joy from fishing were right alongside Fletcher."

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"Fletcher was a fantastic kid," Molly Stommes said. "He got along with everyone. It's so fun to see all the photos (at FletcherFest) of him doing the things he loved."

Matt Stommes agreed and said it was great to see so many families being joyful, smiling and eating second helpings of ice cream. He said Fletcher always wanted to be around others and his enthusiasm was contagious.

"Our kids are running around, all like Fletcher would have done," Matt said. "Fletcher's parents are honoring him in such a perfect way today with this event and with the scholarship fund, it was just extremely (selfless), which is the way that their family's always been, and the way that Fletcher always was, always wanting to be around others."

Mollie and Jesse said Our Lady of Grace in Edina and Our Lady of Peace in Minneapolis, where Mollie works as a counselor, have been supportive. Their home church, Mount Olivet Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, has given the family an outpouring of love and support.

"We've been getting random packages from across the country. I don't know how they found us," Jesse Merkel said with a laugh.

One gift was a quilt from a woman who makes quilts for people whose children have died. She made one for Harper Moyski, too, the Merkels said.

"She prayed over it the entire time she quilted it," Mollie Merkel explained.

"She just quilts and prays," Jesse Merkel said. "I know that there are countless other people around the world that have kept our community in their prayers and what this population has gone through is truly unthinkable, and there's just so many invisible scars that these teachers and students have to live with."

Mollie Merkel said a tragedy like this might tear other communities apart.

"But our community has come closer," she said. "Everyone knows we're in this together. I know Fr. (Dennis) Zehren (pastor of Annunciation) has become close with our pastor, Pastor (David) Lose in this process, as well."

"Fletcher attended Cathedral of the Pines camp, which is run through Mount Olivet," she added, "so there's a scholarship for children (another scholarship in Fletcher's honor) to be able to attend the camp. Just spreading some of the joy and love in different ways across faiths and what he was passionate about."

"If more people lived by (Fletcher's) values, I think we would be much happier," Jesse Merkel said. "More compassion and less vitriol in our world. Hopefully, as a small community, we can start that, and hopefully everyone here can strive to live that way."

This story appears in the **Minneapolis church shooting** feature series. View the full series.