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Two funerals and a parish

by Heidi Schlumpf

"Too young," I thought, when my friend and former fellow parish council member Janine Denomme died last spring at the age of 45.

Then our parish lost Ethan Seitzer. He was 9.

Janine's death from cancer was painful not only for her family and friends but also for many in the parish who barely knew her. A deeply spiritual woman, she had struggled with a lifelong vocation to the priesthood and had answered that call just weeks before her death when she was ordained through the Roman Catholic Womenpriests movement.

That decision to be ordained, according to the Vatican, meant she was automatically excommunicated and led our parish, under orders from the archdiocese, to deny her a Catholic funeral. Her final sendoff was held at a Methodist church but was every bit a "St. Gertrude" funeral, complete with parish musicians, pews full of parishioners and the inclusive spirit for which our parish is known.

Still, the whole controversy left a hole in my soul.

I understand the pressures that even moderately liberal priests are under these days. Witness the poor Tennessee pastor pressured to retire after a video of him disagreeing with church teaching went viral. And I know that Janine knew that by answering her call to priesthood she risked, at the end of her life, such a heartbreaking move from the parish that had benefited from so many of her talents.

I've been told that before she died she forgave those who made the decision to refuse to bury her. But I didn't.

As dozens of women (and some men) discussed their disgust on the parish listserv and talked of strategies

to stay in a sexist church ? or whether to stay ? I kept quiet. Some tried to arrange a protest or a meeting with Chicago Cardinal Francis George, at least one person left the parish, and several chose to stop donating.

As for me, I was too hurt to make a statement with a dramatic exit or protest. Instead I just skipped Mass the weeks after the funeral, trying to avoid the source of my pain.

Weeks turned into months, and I realized I had to make a decision. Was I just ?taking a break? or did our family need to find an alternative faith community?

I got a surprising answer in August when another parish family suffered every parents? nightmare.

The news came via the parish listserv again: Ethan Seitzer, a soon-to-be fourth-grader at the parish school, had drowned in Lake Michigan while on vacation with his family. Grief counseling would be offered to the children. Arrangements were pending. Please pray for the family.

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The name sounded familiar, but it wasn?t until the second e-mail from the parish adoptive families group that I realized I had met the mom a few times in church. They had a daughter from China, as do we.

My heart ached for them, but I didn?t know what to do. The opportunities soon came as the parish sprung into action. Desserts were needed for the post-funeral luncheon. A meal train would be organized in the weeks to come, as would a special ritual on Ethan?s upcoming birthday. One adoptive family (who didn?t even know the Seitzers) organized luminaries to light the way from the neighborhood funeral home to the family?s house after the wake.

The Friday funeral was packed, with the casket and mourners processing in to ?The Little Drummer Boy,? since Ethan had played that role at the Christmas pageant. The pastor emeritus returned to co-preside with the pastor and associate pastor. His homily was typically wise and comforting. After Communion, Ethan?s own poems were read then he was eulogized by his godmother and his father. Boxes of tissues were passed.

I cannot begin to imagine how Ethan?s parents will survive this tragedy, but I suspect that having a supportive faith community will be part of what helps them eventually resurrect a life for themselves and their daughter after such a painful loss. It will take time, and St. Gertrude Parish will be with them for this long, painful journey.

On the way home from the funeral, I realized something had shifted for me. I was proud of my parish, how it had been there for this family in good times and in bad. There is something about death that can bring out the best and the worst in humans ? and human institutions.

The next Sunday, I went back to Mass, where I thanked Ethan for bringing me home and Janine for reminding me that it is imperfect, but still home.

[Heidi Schlumpf is the author of *While We Wait: Spiritual and Practical Advice for Those Trying to Adopt* (ACTA Publications).]

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