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A place that waits to comfort

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A few minutes drive from the Brooklyn Bridge and the New York skyline is the Convent of Mercy. The imposing brick edifice, constructed in 1862, until recently served as the motherhouse of the Brooklyn Sisters of Mercy. Two years ago the wonderful old Brooklyn convent with its enclosed garden and still thriving Dorothy Bennett Mercy Center bade farewell to the sisters who lived there.

Restructuring of personnel and assets now places the central leadership and motherhouse in Merion, Pa., for the five communities that now comprise the Mid-Atlantic community. The convent building had endured the ravages of age and was deemed unfit for residential living, especially by those who were elderly and infirm. The building's west wing, under the supervision of Catholic Charities, remains a safe structure for 70 formerly homeless women, each of whom has her own living space.

What for a while had seemed loss and deep sadness for the sisters has turned into rejoicing. Mercy Home, an agency that cared for abandoned and orphaned children when the convent opened 148 years ago, is moving its headquarters and day programs back to the venerable, renovated building.

By the New Year it will open its doors to a magnificent ministry that cares for developmentally disabled

adults -- some of whom came to it as children 30 or 40 years ago. Today 13 supervised group homes provide shelter and resources for them, but the business offices and day programs will return to the birthplace of this special mission and ministry, and the beat of competent, compassionate service will add grace and beauty to a long, cherished history.

The east wing of the building holds what has long been its heart: a breathtakingly beautiful chapel, completed in 1894. Hundreds of sisters have prayed there, along with orphans, workers and friends. Petitions have risen like incense for the poor, neglected, disconsolate and despairing.

Recent years have witnessed a wave of newcomers to the chapel. They bring their own brokenness. Most are not Catholic -- all are connected by a great, wrenching loss. On Sunday, Oct. 24, the Cherish Life Circle of the Sisters of Mercy, in conjunction with Safe Horizon, a local victims' organization, will hold its 14th Annual Service for Families and Friends of Murder Victims.

Each year about 100 family members arrive, some for the first time; others like Miss Vida who has been at every service, come for their yearly dose of comfort. Welcomed to the auditorium, they find light refreshments and special treats for the children. They have a chance to meet others similarly afflicted mourners and to share their tears and stories before proceeding to the chapel for an interfaith service. They enter it wearing the name of their murdered loved ones for whom there will be prayers, music, hymns and tenderness. They sit in the monastic stalls once reserved for sisters who chanted the office and attended daily Mass. They respond to a litany that promises that in all the seasons of life, "We remember them."

Members of the Cherish Life Circle, who have witnessed 13 such services, hold sacred memories. The first three took place in parish churches. One welcomed a striking, well-dressed Caucasian woman who arrived with her handsome 22-year-old son. She showed the person welcoming her the photo of her recently slain older son. He was wearing a tuxedo and a heart stopping smile. And she wept in our arms. Moments later a beautiful African American woman arrived unattended. Her hesitation signaled unfamiliarity with the large Catholic church that hosted that service. She had a photo of her murdered son, also in his 20s, also wearing a tuxedo. Within minutes the two mothers were comforting one another.

We wonder what became of the man whose fruitless search for his son's killer had lost him his job, his health and his remaining son. He came to the service with his taciturn wife and their grandson, the child of the murdered man. "The one who killed my son killed my whole family," the grieving father said. "Since he died we have not celebrated anything ? not birthday, or Christmas or anything."

"What about the boy?" asked the welcoming Cherish Life member. She referred that family to counselors; however, ten years later one wonders what became of them.

There are stones of grief that block the flow of love through the human heart. Some of our service speakers have recalled that -- Antoinette Bosco and Rev. Walter Everett among them. Both have murdered sons, subjects of widespread publicity. Tears in a safe place sometimes, miraculously, help melt the stones -- or, as in the case of Lazarus, can roll it away to allow new life to emerge.

In an age where weapons are easily accessible and rage is too often irrepressible, there aren't enough Services for Families and Friends of Murder Victims. Anyone wishing for information about ours may e-mail the writer at Cherilife@aol.com.

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[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo is a past president of the Leadership conference of Women Religious.]

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