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Friends, family reflect on faith of couple missing from crashed cruise ship

by Theresa Malloy by Catholic News Service



Jerry and Barbara Heil are seen in a undated photo from a parish directory. The couple, longtime parishioners of St. Pius X Church in White Bear Lake, Minn., were among those missing after a cruise ship capsized Jan. 13 off the coast of Italy. (CNS photo/Catholic Spirit)

WHITE BEAR LAKE, Minn. -- Friends and parishioners of St. Pius X Church in White Bear Lake reflected on the lives of Jerry and Barb Heil at an evening prayer service Wednesday.

On Thursday, divers resumed the search for 21 people still missing after a Costa Concordia cruise ship crashed into the Italian coast Jan. 13. The Heils are the only Americans who remained unaccounted for among the more than 4,200 passengers.

Eleven people died.

At St. Pius X, about 450 people gathered to sing, pray, reflect, light candles and pay tribute to the Heils.

"It was a fantastic tribute to the way they lived their lives," said Carri Petronack, St. Pius X social ministry coordinator. "A lot of people knew them, and they lived their life to be ready for heaven every day and go to the Lord."

Several people commented on the Heil couple's tremendous display of faith, including their granddaughter, Lexi Heil.

They are "amazing people (with) such a strong faith," she said.

Barb Heil has been active in a close-knit parish rosary group. Jerry Heil is a member of the Knights of Columbus, which he joined in 1969 but rejoined more actively in 2002, said fellow Knight Duane Jabas.

"He would keep out of the spotlight," Jabas said. "He was very active in our church."

Jerry Heil has been active in pro-life efforts and the marriage amendment initiative. He has taught faith formation and adult education classes. He even helped launch the parish website and put in long hours, Petronack said.

The couple has regularly volunteered at church events. For more than 18 years, Barb Heil volunteered at the Dorothy Day family center every Friday, said Dennis Bechel, another Knight of Columbus.

Once parishioners found out about the incident at Mass Jan. 15, prayer vigils have continued nonstop since 11 a.m., Jabas said.

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Bechel and Jabas have helped oversee the continuous prayer and put in a prayer request for the Knights of Columbus to help.

Bechel said he has seen all sorts of people come to prayer and support the family, even those of other faith backgrounds.

Daughter-in-law Sue Heil said all the support for her family is "amazing."

In an exclusive interview with *The Catholic Spirit*, newspaper of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, she described the past few days as a "roller coaster." The family had not talked to any reporters before this interview, and instead was using their blog to communicate with the media and the public.

Sue Heil added with tears streaming down her face, "Grandpa and Grandma are amazing people. I can't say enough good things about them. They love the grandkids. ... They're the best role models." The Heils have 15 grandchildren, she said.

Bechel said, "For them, family was first. God bless them, and bring them back together."

Sue Heil said she hopes people can learn from the example of Jerry and Barb Heil's faith. "Start now because you can never do too much," she said, "They touched so many people."

The community also prayed for others affected by the Costa Concordia tragedy.

"Continue to pray for their rescuers and everyone else," Lexi Heil said.

In the days leading up to the prayer service, parish business administrator Lawrence Erickson said St. Pius X parishioners had been praying the rosary before daily Mass and offering prayers for the couple during Mass and perpetual adoration.

"I do not remember a day, and I've been here five years, that I haven't seen one or the other of them here," Erickson said of the Heils. They have been involved in the parish festival, Dorothy Day Center, social ministry and teaching faith formation, he added. "They lead from within. ... They touch but don't leave a fingerprint. They are that soft in their approach on how much they give."

Aaron Heil -- son of the Heils, a first-grade teacher in the St. Michael-Albertville School District and a member of St. Michael in St. Michael -- gave The Associated Press the following statement from the family: "We are waiting patiently for the rescuers to safely try to find our parents," it said. "Our prayers and thoughts are with our parents; those others that are still missing and their families; and the brave rescuers. We are working closely with the U.S. Embassy in Italy and are confident that everything is being done to find our parents."

Jabas said that adoration and prayer will continue at St. Pius X.

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