Family’s heartbreak leads to poignant lesson of great love in the midst of great loss

Looking back, Lauren Megel never imagined that her devastating loss would teach her so much about the incredibly supportive love of others—or the depth of love that she could give and share. She also never understood so fully the depth of God’s love for her.

At the time—in early January of this year—Lauren was an expectant mother who couldn’t wait to meet her new child. She and her husband Adam had already been blessed with two daughters—Abigail, 4, and Madelyn, 2. And the joy of having a new family member filled all of them when they went together for what was expected to be a quick, pre-natal doctor’s appointment for Lauren, who was 16 weeks pregnant.

The ultrasound technician quickly turned off the screen, but it was too late. “The ultrasound technician quickly turned off the screen, but it was too late. The picture was already seared into my memory.” Amid that heartbreak, Lauren couldn’t help but see the light of God again.

As a technician set up the ultrasound machine, Lauren anticipated seeing her baby “doing swirls and dips and dives.” Instead, I saw our baby laying there, still and lifeless,” recalls Lauren, who is 30. “And right there, in front of strangers and my young children, I started sobbing big, ugly, loud and uncontrollable sobs.

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By John Shaughnessy

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Catholic Aviation Association seeks to build and evangelize world of aviation, page 9.

Pope seeks prayers for Egyptians beheaded by Islamic State

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He called on people to pray as well for the victims’ families and for Egypt’s Orthodox leader, Pope Tawadros II, “who is suffering so much.” Pope Francis called Pope Tawadros on Feb. 16 to express his sorrow over the deaths.

Egypt, meanwhile, continued to mourn its 21 nationals, who had been working in Libya when the extremist group kidnapped them. Their beheading was depicted in gruesome detail in a video released on Feb. 15 on a pro-Islamic State website.

On the same evening, in a nationally televised speech, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi called on his country’s government to provide full support to the families of the victims and vowed that Egypt maintained the right to retaliate.

Soon afterward, the Egyptian air force began bombing what it said were Islamic State targets in Libya.

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By Sean Gallagher

Like confessions in many churches, a confessional in Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary Church in Indianapolis features a light that shows if a priest is available to celebrate the sacrament of penance or, when a red light is showing, if he is currently hearing a confession. (Photo illustration by Sean Gallagher)

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Adam and Lauren Megel of St. Bartholomew Parish in Columbus pose for a family photo with their daughters, Madelyn, left, and Abigail, in October of 2014, a few months before a great loss in their lives showed them how much they are loved. (Photo by David Bugert Photography)
Pope urges new cardinals to search for the lost, the sick

VATICAN CITY (CNS)—The Catholic Church cannot call itself Church if it is a “closed caste” where the sick, the wounded and sinners are shunned, Pope Francis told the 20 new cardinals he created.

“The way of the Church is precisely to leave out four walls behind and to go out in search of those who are distant, those essentially on the outskirts of life,” the pope said on Feb. 15 as he celebrated Mass in St. Peter’s Basilica with the churchmen who received their red hats on Feb. 14, with about 140 other cardinals in attendance.

“Focal openness to serving others is our hallmark; it alone is our title of honor,” he told the cardinals.

The Mass capped a four-day gathering of the cardinals. They met with Pope Francis on Feb. 12-13 to review ideas for the reform of the Roman Curia and Vatican finances as well as the progress made in the work of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors.

Pope Francis’ choice of new cardinals emphasized his focus on geographical peripheries and outreach to those often excluded from society. The 20 new cardinals came from 18 countries, including the first-ever cardinals from Tonga, Myanmar and Cape Verde.

In his second round of naming cardinals, he once again skipped large Italian dioceses usually headed by cardinals—notably Venice and Turin—and tapped Ancona and Agrigento, which is led by now-Cardinal Francesco Montenegro, a dedicated defender of the thousands of immigrants who risk their lives crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Europe.

In the almost two years since his election, Pope Francis repeatedly has called Catholics to reach out to people on the margins of both the Church and society.

He also frequently cautions against the temptation of being modern-day scribes and Pharisees, who can allow obedience to the letter of the law to prevent them from reaching out to others with compassion.

The Sunday Gospel reading was St. Mark’s version of Jesus touching a leper—which was forbidden by Jewish law—healing him and, in that way, allowing him back into the community.

The purpose of the law against touching someone with leprosy and forcing them to live outside the community “was to safeguard the healthy, to protect the righteous,” the pope said.

“Jesus, the new Moses, wanted to heal the leper,” the pope said. “He wanted to touch him and restore him to the community without being ‘hemmed in’ by prejudice, conformity to the prevailing mindset or worry about becoming infected.”

What is more, the pope said, “Jesus responds immediately to the leper’s plea, without waiting to study the situation and all its possible consequences.”

“For Jesus, what matters above all is reaching out to save those far off, healing the wounds of the sick, restoring everyone to God’s family. This is scandalous to some people.”

But Jesus, he said, “does not think of the closed-minded who are scandalized even by a work of healing, scandalized before any kind of openness, by any action outside of their mental and spiritual boxes, by any caress or sign of tenderness which does not fit into their usual thinking and their ritual purity.”

Pope Francis said there are two basic tendencies in the life of faith: being afraid of losing the saved, or wanting to save the lost. The Church’s way, he said, “has always been the way of Jesus, the way of mercy and reinstatement.”

“Going out in search of the lost, he told the cardinals, “does not mean underestimating the dangers of letting wolves into the fold,” but it does mean “rolling up our sleeves and not standing by and watching passively the suffering of the world.”

“The way of the Church is not to condemn anyone for eternity,” but “to pour out the balm of God’s mercy on all those who ask for it with a sincere heart.”

The foreign minister of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, meanwhile, referred to the Islamic State extremists as “sick souls frantic to shed the blood of innocents.”

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Condemnation for the beheading of the Egyptian Christians in Libya quickly grew beyond Egypt as regional leaders, Muslim and Christian alike, learned of the situation and all its possible consequences.

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Pope Francis greeted new Cardinal Berhaneyesus Souraphiel of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, after presenting a red hat to him during a consistory in St. Peter’s Basilica at the Vatican on Feb. 14. The pope created 20 new cardinals. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

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"Most movies and many DVD resources you already use have options for captioning or subtitles. By using and advertising your use of them, you can make these tools much more accessible to those who are deaf or hard of hearing."
Poll shows majority support for religious freedom in marriage debate

WASHINGTON (CNS)—A recent Associated Press poll shows that while a majority of Americans support the legal redefinition of marriage, a majority believe that the religious liberty of people, including owners of wedding-related businesses, must be protected. The poll’s results show “that support for marriage is too low to be sustainable,” said Sen. Scott Schneider, R-Indianapolis, co-author of Senate Bill 101, which would amend Indiana’s RFRA law to protect religious freedom for all Hoosiers.

Schneider explained that the religious freedom bill establishes restoring the compelling interest test, meaning that religious liberty must be protected to the extent that her or his practice of religion has been substantially burdened by a state law or regulation. If this is determined to be true, the state government may then establish that it is a compelling interest for it to do so. Even if such an interest is shown, the state government must use the least restrictive means in setting up a burden on religious liberty.

“This sets a foundation and framework for what governmental regulation of religious beliefs must pass before it restricts religious freedom,” Schneider said.

Sen. Dennis Kruse, R-Auburn, is also a co-author of the bill. Currently, 19 states have passed state-level RFRA legislation, and 10 states’ constitutions have been interpreted to restore the compelling interest test when cases of the exercise of religion are substantially burdened.

Father David Mary Enigo, superior of Franciscan Brothers Minor in Fort Wayne, told the panel that freedom of religion is not simply the right to worship, but to serve. Citing the parable of the Good Samaritan, Father David said Christians are called to serve without discrimination.

“It has always been the Judeo-Christian faith that has taught us that faith must be expressed, acted upon, and lived in, the church at home, and in the public square,” he said. “St. James tells us that faith without works is dead (Jer 2:26). My religious community of Franciscans and I continue this work. Our faith cannot be truly alive if Christians do not have the freedom to not only worship our God, but to serve him. Serving our God has always been the business of the Church.”

Father David is home to three-quarters of a million Catholics, with more than 400 Catholic churches, 20 Catholic hospitals, 20 Catholic nursing homes and more than 200 institutions of Catholic learning ranging from pre-kindergarten to graduate school. “Where there is a need, the Church is there to help,” he said. Peti Breen, special council for the Chicago-based St. Thomas More Society, said that the proposed Indiana RFRA law does this for hundreds of years. “We are providing an opportunity to serve the common good in the secular sense, while we live out our faith.”

The measure would protect members of the clergy against same-sex marriage being sued on their stance.


Archbishop Salvatore J. Cordileone of San Francisco, chairman of the U.S. bishops’ Subcommittees for the Promotion and Defense of Marriage, sent letters to both lawmakers strongly supporting the measure. Marriage has been redifined to include couples of the same sex in 37 states and the District of Columbia. Eleven of those states changed their definition of marriage since 2004 by popular vote (three) or the state legislature (eight). The result, including judicial opinions and state laws that have been legally redifined by federal court decisions. Thirty states ban same-sex marriage by constitutional amendment and 12 by constitutional amendment and state laws.

In April, the U.S. Supreme Court will hear oral arguments in four marriage redefinition cases it agreed to take—from Tennessee, Michigan, Kentucky and Ohio. The court’s decisions will put the question of whether the 14th Amendment requires states to broaden its definition of marriage to include couples of the same sex and whether it requires them to recognize same-sex marriages licensed in other states.

AP poll, which was conducted by GfK Public Affairs, showed an even split among Americans about whether the high court should rule that same-sex marriage must be legal nationwide—it gave 50 percent to those who believe it should but 48 percent to those who think it should not.

The margin of error for the poll was plus or minus 3.5 percentage points.
Medical assistance with the battle of the bulge

Bariatric surgery, which often involves banding of the stomach, is a widely used procedure for treating severe obesity. When another approach that relies on an implantable “stomach pacemaker” also appears poised to assist those struggling with significant weight gain.

Many people have already benefitted from these kinds of surgical interventions, enabling them to shed a great deal of weight, improve their health and get a new lease on life. At the same time, however, it’s important for us to examine such interventions from an ethical point of view. It’s not simply a matter of weight loss, achieved by any means whatsoever, but a rational decision made after carefully weighing the risks, benefits and alternatives.

Björn Hofmann, a medical ethicist who writes about the ethical issues surrounding obesity-correction techniques notes, “Bariatric surgery is particularly interesting because it uses surgical methods to modify healthy organs, is not curative, but offers surgical relief for a condition that is considered to result from lack of self-control and is subject to significant prejudice.”

The healthy organ that is modified is the stomach, which may be either banded or surgically modified with staples to create a small pouch. This causes food to be retained in the small pouch for a longer period of time, inducing a feeling of fullness, with the effect of reducing how much a person ingests at a single meal.

Like any surgical technique, bariatric surgery has risks associated with it. Mortality from the surgery itself is less than three percent, but post-surgical leakage into the abdomen or malfunction of the output from the pouch can cause further surgeries.

Nearly 20 percent of patients experience chronic gastrointestinal symptoms. Wound infections, delayed healing, vitamin deficiencies, cardiorespiratory failure and other complications like diabetes or osteoporosis can also occasionally arise.

A new device, sometimes described as a “pacemaker for the stomach,” was recently approved by regulators at the Food and Drug Administration. This rechargeable and implantable device blocks electrical nerve signals between the stomach and the brain, and helps to diminish the feeling of being hungry.

The cost for the small machine, along with its surgical implantation, is expected to run between $30,000 and $40,000, making it competitive with various forms of bariatric surgery.

Because the stomach pacemaker does not modify the stomach or the intestines as organs, but instead reduces appetite by blocking electrical signals in the abdominal vagus nerve, some of the surgery-related complications associated with modifying or stapling the stomach are eliminated. Other surgical complications related to the insertion of the device into the abdomen have sometimes been observed, however, as well as adverse events associated with its use, like pain, nausea and vomiting.

Bariatric surgery, it should be noted, is not universally successful in terms of the underlying goal of losing weight, and some patients ultimately regain the weight they lose either through enlargement of the stomach pouch or a return to compulsive eating patterns or both. Results have been similarly mixed for patients receiving the stomach pacemaker: some lose and keep off significant amounts of weight; others show only minimal improvements while some are unable to adhere to the needed lifelong changes in eating habits. How to respond to such individual questions that need to be considered with regard to surgically-based approaches: Should an approach be aversive and potentially risky surgery be routinely used for an anomaly that might be addressed by medical means in diet and exercise? What criteria should be met before such surgery is seriously considered?

It is also important of ethical considerations that physicians and surgeons not be unduly influenced by device manufacturers to utilize their various stomach banding apparatuses or their pacemaker devices.

In 1991, the National Institutes of Health released a consensus statement on “Gastrointestinal Surgery for Severe Obesity” that offers guidance for clinical decision making. The statement notes that, beyond having a serious weight problem, patients seeking therapy for the first time for their obesity should “generally be encouraged to try non-surgical treatment approaches including dietary counseling, exercise, behavior modification and support.”

These broad guidelines are intended to spark discussion on the part of patients and their medical team. How much support has an individual really received prior to looking into weight reduction surgery or stomach pacemaker insertion? Some patients may have tried diligently for years to control their weight, while others may have made only cursory, poorly supported efforts. The need for support is also likely to continue following bariatric surgery, or after the implantation of a stomach pacemaker.

In sum, there are notable differences between such surgical interventions and traditional weight loss techniques involving exercise and diet.

With the surgical techniques, due diligence will be required both prior to and following such interventions, particularly in light of the ongoing discussions about the cost-effectiveness, safety, risks and outcomes of bariatric and conventional surgery for the overweight patient.

Letters Policy

Letters from readers are published in The Criterion as part of the newspaper’s commitment to “the responsible exchange of ideas and expressed opinion among the People of God” (Communion et Progressus, 116).

Letters are welcome and every effort will be made to include letters from as many people and representing as many viewpoints as possible. Letters should be brief, clear and compelling, and be submitted in writing on letterhead or as an e-mail. They should be respectful, temperate in tone. They must reflect a basic sense of courtesy and respect.

The editors reserve the right to select the letters that will be published and to edit letters and responses from them as necessary. Letters may be written in English or Spanish, and should be limited to 500 words. Letters longer than 500 words will be returned to the writer.

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Readers with access to e-mail may send letters to criterion@archindy.org.
Our Lenten journey, a pilgrimage of hope

This is the first of a series of articles I am writing for the season of Lent. The Church provides us with this unique penitential season as a means of preparing for the joy of Easter.

As Pope Francis reminds us in his apostolic exhortation, “Evangelii Gaudium” (“The Joy of the Gospel”), joy is not something that comes to us without preparation. We must be ready to receive it—sometimes in surprising ways, and when we least expect it.

The six weeks of Lent are a time when we have the opportunity to get ready, to prepare ourselves, for the special joy that comes with the Easter Triduum, the passion, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Earlier this week, I returned from a 12-day pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I can’t imagine a better way to prepare for the spiritual journey that is Lent. To be actually present in the land of Jesus, to pray where he prayed, and to experience firsthand all the holy places that the Gospel speaks about, is an experience that I wish every Christian could have.

My fellow pilgrims and I were very conscious of the fact that we traveled to the Holy Land on behalf of all of our people of archdiocese, the Church in central and southern Indiana. We prayed for you, and we brought you with us (in spirit) every time we visited one of the Holy Land’s remarkable sacred spaces.

Pilgrimages are as old as Judaism and Christianity (and many other religious traditions). St. Luke tells us that the Holy Family (Jesus, Mary and Joseph) made an annual pilgrimage from Nazareth to Jerusalem in observance of the Feast of the Passover.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI writes in Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives that the deeper meaning of these annual pilgrimages for the Jewish people was the powerful affirmation that Israel was “God’s pilgrim people, always journeying toward its God and receiving its identity and unity from the encounter with God in the one Temple. The Holy Family takes its place within this great pilgrim community on its way to the Temple and to God.”

We Christians carry on this tradition of pilgrimage, but we recognize that our destination is not a building (the Temple) or any earthly place no matter how holy. Our pilgrimage is a spiritual journey that makes it possible for us to follow Jesus on the Way of the Cross. In this pilgrimage, there are many stops along the way, and sometimes many detours, but our final destination is the joy of heaven—our true homeland where we will be united with God and all his family for eternity.

During my ministry as a member of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (Redemptorists), I traveled to many different places in more than 70 countries, but I had never been to the Holy Land. When members of the archdiocese asked me to consider leading this pilgrimage, I thought about it and concluded that the time had come.

For most of my life, I have been fascinated by the meaning of our Church’s teaching that the Word was made flesh. St. John’s Gospel tells us that God took flesh and became one of us (literally that he “pitched his tent among us”) at a specific moment in human history, and that he really walked this Earth in a particular land.

I hoped that by tracing his footsteps and praying at many of the places that were so important to Jesus, the Word made flesh, I could become a better disciple and a better shepherd for his people.

I also knew that pilgrimages to holy places can be a source of genuine faith-filled friendship for all who participate. I was confident that 12 days in the Holy Land would unite my fellow pilgrims and me with God, with each other, and with the entire people of central and southern Indiana in a very special way.

The journey that my fellow pilgrims and I just completed was a vivid reminder of both the earthly experience of Jesus of Nazareth, and the spiritual journey that all of us are making as pilgrim people called to follow in his footsteps. I pray that it will make our Lenten journey all the more productive.

I also pray that my written reflections over the six weeks of Lent, which have been inspired by this very special Holy Land pilgrimage, will help us all in our spiritual journey to our heavenly homeland.

May this Lent be a time of grace for all of us as we prepare for Easter joy.

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May this Lent be a time of grace for all of us as we prepare for Easter joy.
In January 1945, 70 years ago last month, soldiers of the Soviet Union’s Red Army liberated the Auschwitz concentration camp, operated in Poland by Nazi Germany during World War II. Auschwitz still stands today as the primary symbol of the Holocaust in which millions of Jews were exterminated. It is also the place where a Polish Franciscan priest laid down his life so that another prisoner might live. That priest, Maximilian Kolbe, was declared a saint in 1982 by St. John Paul II.

He is the subject of a one-man play, Maximilian: Saint of Auschwitz, which has been performed at 7 p.m. on March 3 and 4 at the Knights of Columbus’ McGowan Hall, 1305 N. Delaware St., in Indianapolis. Admission for the play is $15. It is suitable for ages 10 and up, and runs approximately 90 minutes.

St. Maximilian Kolbe will be portrayed in the play by Leonardo DelTimpt, the founder and president of the Battle Ground, Wash.-based Saint Lake Productions, which has produced plays and films about Christ and the saints for 33 years.

The play’s performance in Indianapolis is being sponsored by the Central Indiana Chapter of the Knights of Columbus, which helps coordinate activities among a number of Knights’ councils.

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For more information about the play, go to www.StMaxDrama.com.

By Sean Gallagher

St. Maximilian Kolbe

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HOW TO MAKE A GOOD CONFESSION

Before confession

Confession is not difficult, but it does require preparation. We should begin with prayer, placing ourselves in the presence of God, our loving Father. We seek healing and forgiveness through repentance and a resolve to sin no more.

Then we review our lives since our last confession, searching our thoughts, words and actions for that which did not conform to God’s command to love him and one another through his laws and the laws of his Church. This is called an examination of conscience.

Questions that can help with an examination of conscience can be found at www.archindy.org/thelightison/guide.html#before.

Going to confession

1. The priest gives a blessing or greets the person coming to make a confession.
2. The person going to confession makes the sign of the cross and says, “Bless me father, for I have sinned. My last confession was …” (give weeks, months, or years).
3. Confess specific sins to the priest. If you are unsure or uneasy, tell him and ask for help.
4. After finishing confessing his or her sins, the person going to confession says to the priest, “I am sorry for these and all my sins.”
5. The priest will then give a penance (often some prayers to pray or simple works of mercy to perform), and offer advice to help you become a better Catholic Christian.
6. The person making the confession then prays an act of contrition such as the following: “My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against you whom I should love above all things. I firmly intend, with your help, to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin. Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us. In his name, my God, have mercy.”
7. The priest, acting in the person of Christ, then absolves the person going to confession from his or her sins.

After confession

Give thanks to God in prayer for the mercy that he has showered upon you in absolving you of your sins, and seek his grace to avoid those sins in the future. Also, take time soon after confession to perform the penance that the priest assigned during the celebration of the sacrament of penance.

Conformation

continued from page 1

Confession that night.
“I fully expected to sit there for an hour and a half,” he said. “I was looking forward to it. I was going to sit there and catch up on homily readings and spiritual readings.”

As it turned out, he had a steady stream of people coming to confess their sins and experience the mercy of God through sacramental absolution.

“I was just amazed,” Father Craig said. “I was busy the whole time and stayed an extra hour.”

His experience of “The Light Is on for You” was not unique. Father Patrick Beidelman, executive director of the archdiocesan Secretariat for Spiritual Life and Worship, said that a “large majority” of archdiocesan pastors said that the program was a success in 2014.

As a result, “The Light Is on for You” will take place in the archdiocese this year on two days—March 4 and March 18.

From 6:30 p.m.-8 p.m. on those days, priests will be available in each parish and parish cluster across central and southern Indiana to celebrate the sacrament of penance. Members of clustered parishes will be informed at which church the sacrament will be available.

Father Michael O’Mara’s experience of the program last year went a good bit beyond what happened with Father Craig.

Father O’Mara heard confessions until midnight at St. Gabriel’s Archangel Parish in Indianapolis, where he serves as pastor.

The parish’s pastoral associate, Aaron Thomas, whom Father O’Mara jokingly describes as his “boss,” was concerned enough about him that he sent him refreshments between confessions.

“I’d been in there for all that time, and it was 10:30,” said Father O’Mara with a laugh as he recalled the story. “So I hope that people are hearing this as an invitation to utilize again a dramatically underutilized sacrament in the Church. My prayer is that it’s the beginning of a trend, so that people have access to this great artery of God’s mercy in their lives.”

—Father Patrick Beidelman, executive director of the archdiocesan Secretariat for Spiritual Life and Worship
The Carmel Deeney Chapter of the Catholic Aviation Association (CAA) is hosting a breakfast buffet and meeting from 8:30-10:30 a.m. on Feb. 28 at the Lions Club, 141 E. Main St., in Carmel. The public is invited to attend.

After breakfast, there will be a presentation of CAA’s plans to support all who are interested or involved in any aspect of aviation while establishing an environment that promotes faith, flying and fellowship. If you love aviation and flying, you are invited to see the group’s plan that supports general aviation, provides for affordable flying and charts a path to a pilot’s license for those who want to learn to fly.

A $5 donation is requested for all attendees older than 14 years of age. Please RSVP by Feb. 25 with the number of people in your party by sending an e-mail to CAA@CatholicAviation.org, or to make a donation, log on to www.catholicaviation.org.

For more information, call (317) 662-4359.
Bishop says ruling means Church not free ‘to practice what we preach’

PHILADELPHIA (CNS)—Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Philadelphia praised the announcement by Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf on Feb. 13 that he is granting a reprieve for death-row inmate Terrence Williams, who was scheduled to be executed on March 4.

In a memo, Wolf said he would extend the reprieve to all pending the outcome of November that the regulations improperly divided the Catholic Church into two tiers with houses of worship getting an exemption, and related religious organizations getting lesser protection. The court also reversed the order granting an injunction for Geneva College in its case. The Geneva case had been consolidated on appeal with the dioceses’ cases.

The Pittsburgh Diocese said Bishop Zubik and his advisers were studying the opinion with their legal counsel, and would decide whether to ask for a rehearing of the suit by the full appeals court or to file a petition for a review in the U.S. Supreme Court.

Pennsylvania governor puts off executions, says system ‘riddled with flaws’

PI ttsburgh (CNS)—A three-judge panel’s Feb. 11 ruling on a court challenge to the federal contraceptive, sterilization and abortifacient mandate “says that the Church is no longer free to practice what we preach,” Pittsburgh Bishop David A. Zubik said.

The panel of the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals reversed a decision by a federal judge last November to grant the Pittsburgh and Erie dioceses a temporary injunction against enforcement of the mandate.

Under the federal health care law, most employers, including religious ones, are required to cover employees’ artificial birth control, sterilization and abortion-causing drugs, even if employers are morally opposed to such coverage.

“I am deeply disappointed in this decision,” Bishop Zubik said in a statement. “Such a ruling should cause deep concern for anyone who cares about any First Amendment rights, especially the right to teach and practice a religious faith. Some of our Catholic beliefs are countercultural.

“Our employees work for us understanding that and, in many cases, giving thanks that they work for an institution that upholds those very values.”

The Pittsburgh and Erie dioceses filed suit against the federal government over the mandate citing the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

The appeals panel ruling would require Catholic institutions, such as Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, to facilitate access to contraceptive, abortifacient and sterilization coverage through their employee health care plans, or else face massive fines.

The Pittsburgh and Erie dioceses “maintain that the mandate to facilitate actions that the Church deems immoral will create a substantial burden on the free exercise of religious beliefs,” said a news release from the Pittsburgh Diocese.

The panel’s ruling, written by Judge Marjorie Rendell, said the court found that the regulations did not impose a substantial burden on the religious organizations.

The court also disagreed with the U.S. District Court’s conclusion last March 9, 2015

Lenten programs

at Fatima Retreat House and The Benedict Inn

Quenching Your Spiritual Thirst

An ‘FBI: Fatima/Benedict Inn or Faith Building Institutions’

Evening of Reflection with Fr. Mark O’Keefe, OSB

The ‘FBI’ invites you to Fatima Retreat House for an evening of reflection for Lent. Through the teachings shared by the desert Fathers and Mothers, Sr. Betty will help the participants expand their journey through Lent. This time of prayer, penance, and preparation for Easter will be enhanced by the wisdom they left us as their legacy. Come and explore ways to quench your spiritual thirst by integrating their legacy and enriching your personal journey toward Christ!”

St. Teresa of Avila

An ‘FBI: Fatima/Benedict Inn or Faith Building Institutions’

Evening of Reflection with Fr. Mark O’Keefe

This program will be held at the Benedict Inn. For more information and to register, please contact the Benedict Inn at 317-788-7381.

St. Vincent Heart Center is continuously pushing the limits of what’s possible in heart care. To do that takes an amazing amount of skill, study, experience and dedication. But it also takes passion. A passion to make a difference in the lives of those who suffer from heart disease. And a desire to look beyond the boundaries to find better ways. Close to home. Second to none.

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THE SPIRIT OF CARING®
Faith

Detachment, discernment can lead to growth in faith

I suspect most people know what it feels like to be pulled in two directions at once. I know I do. Lent for many of us is a story of being pulled in two directions at once. From one side, a not-distant Easter pulls us forward into Lent with a message about a new creation and the countless possibilities it holds for renewing personal, family and community life.

From the other side, however, powerful forces pull in a very different direction. They argue that Lent next year might be a better time to pursue answers to questions we have about faith, to find some way to give care to people who suffer or hunger, or to flesh out our vision of what Christian life is all about.

The problem is that we are human beings with limited energies, strengths and time. We do not accomplish all that we wish. Why? Because responsibilities and commitments of all kinds press upon us, and it takes so much effort just to prevent chaos from taking over our households and work.

So we may not feel entirely free to pursue the noble dream of Lenten renewal now. But are we freer than we think? Could we become freer?

Personal freedom is limited in hundreds of ways: by fears of what others might think of us; by workaholism that leaves us no disposable time; or by a too-rigorous adherence to our daily routine at home that can be enslaving.

The list is endless. Freedom is hemmed in by Internet addictions that consume us, or by old angers blocking our pathway to present-day happiness. Then there is the situation created when we do not communicate with those we love about the aspirations of our souls, depriving us of the support they might otherwise provide.

This brings me to a curious term in the Christian lexicon starting with the letter “d”—a word heard infrequently nowadays though it is relevant for anyone hoping to undertake a Lenten journey toward new life and freedom: “detachment.”

This and another little-understood term beginning with the letter “d”—“discernment”—are often proposed as ways of resolving issues that hold people back from growing as Christians.

Through Christian detachment, people zero in on God’s centrality in their lives. The challenge is to detach from whatever keeps God at arm’s length, like an excessive centrality in their lives. The challenge is to detach from growing as Christians.

Many today, especially those familiar with a popular slogan of the 12-step programs calling people to “let go and let God,” are more likely to speak of “letting go” than of “detaching” from a habit, lifestyle or fear that limits and holds them back. The message, though, is similar.

If we can identify an internal or external force that tugs us away from renewing our lives, will we find, particularly with the support of others and over time, that we are able to let go of it? Is it possible, for example, to let go of some demanding daily task that eats up the bit of time we might like to invest in Lenten spirituality?

Lent is a time when the faithful are invited to attempt to let go of something troublesome that keeps them from turning toward the Lord of Easter, who calls them in a new direction, calls them to ongoing conversion.

But how do people know the new direction God wants for them? This is where discernment enters the picture. For Christians, discernment is a process of paying close attention both to all that is good, and to whatever is troubling in their lives in order to detect the voice of God speaking here and now.

In a pastoral letter issued at the end of 2014, Cardinal Vincent Nichols of Westminster, England, discussed Christian discernment. Basic to this process, he suggested, are questions such as:

- What makes me fearful and anxious? What warms my heart of faith? What is wrong and needs forgiveness? Where is God present and working in my life?

That final question might easily set the tone for reflection throughout the days of Lent. The challenge comes in realizing that God’s voice is heard not just in tranquil, peaceful moments, but in the midst of troubles and moments of feeling overwhelmed or lost.

Powerful forces may pull people in one direction, but God, “present and at work” in their lives, also tugs at them, urging them to detach from fears and anxieties, and to open up to the renewal of their lives.

FaithAlive!

By David Gibson

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By Fr. Lawrence Mick

The 1979 edition of the New American Bible translated Luke this way: “If anyone comes to me without turning his back on his father and mother . . .” Jesus is not advocating hate, but Luke uses stark language to make the point forcefully. The issue really is who comes first in our lives.

A little later in the same chapter, Jesus insists that “everyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14.33). Luke family members, possessions can get in the way of doing the will of God.

The same point is made in the Gospel according to Matthew, but here the language is a bit softer and perhaps clearer: “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me” (Mt 10.37-38).

So the issue really is not “hating,” but “loving less.” Anytime that we love anyone or anything more than we love God, we have our priorities mixed up. Jesus calls us to put God first, above everyone and everything else. And that’s really the point of the virtue we call detachment.

Detachment is the opposite of attachment. If we get too attached to someone or something, we cannot let that person or object go, even when such letting go is necessary. So practicing detachment means practicing letting go.

Many Catholics have tried to practice detachment during Lent by giving up something they like or something as a way of familiarizing themselves with it. Giving up coffee or candy or smoking can be a way to make sure that those things don’t control our lives. But we might want to look a bit more deeply at other things or habits or relationships that keep us from following Christ completely. It may be there that we really need to learn detachment.

We must be detached enough from other people and possessions, Jesus insists, that they cannot interfere with following God’s will.

The issue comes into focus when someone in our lives urges us to do something that pulls us away from God. Who comes first, that person or God? Or it may be attachment to our possessions that keeps us from helping the needy as Christ commands us. Again, what comes first, our wealth and possessions or the will of God? So don’t hate anybody, but stay detached enough from everything and everyone who is not God that you can always put the love of God first in your life. Then love everyone and everything else as God loves them.

(Father Lawrence Mick is a priest of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati.)
Ecumenism includes personal conversion, institutional renewal

To argue. To debate. To dialogue. These are very different words, in which ideas are shared. Arguments more often become a contest often fraught with emotion. Debates are more formal, less emotional contests, less about the person who dares to disagree in dialogue, and respect for the truth they speak from their knowledge, and in the case of religious dialogue, their faith. Prior to the Second Vatican Council, there was little formal dialogue between the Roman Church and other Christian communities or other religions. The Reformation and Counter-Reformation had left a legacy in that, in debate, “Being right” was seen essential. Therefore, there had to be a win.

Pope Pius XII cautiously opened the possibility of dialogue. St. John XXIII widened the avenues of dialogue through calling the “ecumenical council” known as Vatican II. Official representatives of various Christian traditions were invited to participate during the sessions. They did not speak, though their reactions and input were sought in informal gatherings. Two of this Council in particular lead to official dialogues being established: the “Decree on Ecumenism” (“Ad缨Redintegrare,” 1964), and the “Declaration on Religious Freedom” (“Dignitatis Humanae,” 1965). Cardinal Walter Kasper, president emeritus of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, wrote the following in 2003 reflection: “Nature and Purpose of Ecumenical Dialogue”:

“Ecumenical dialogue is a dialogue between those who believe in Jesus Christ and are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, but who belong to different Christian communities, in matters of faith, church structures and morals.”

He went on to say: “… ecumenical dialogue must be understood as a Spirit guided spiritual process and as one way in which the Christian Church moves towards the one and for all revealed truth, and advances towards a fuller understanding of the whole of Christ’s Church.”

The “Decree on Ecumenism,” Cardinal Kasper states, “preserves three dimensions of ecumenism. Firstly, there is theological dialogue, where experts explain the beliefs of each individual Church, so that their characteristics become clearer, and better mutual understanding is fostered. Good is seen to exist, practical cooperation and especially common prayer, and represents the very heart of the ecumenical movement. This aspect of dialogue encourages us not only to seek an academic theological dialogue, but the whole life of the Church and of all the faithful.”

“The third dimension is renewal and reform of our own Church, so that she becomes more fully an authentic sign and witness of the Gospel and an invitation for other Christians.” There cannot be ecclesiastical renewal without personal conversion and institutional renewal.

“The ecumenism ad extra, the dialogue with the other Churches and ecclesial communities, presupposes therefore the ecumenism ad intra, learning from each others’ experience of reform. However, a dialogue cannot be achieved by convergence alone but also, and perhaps even more so, by confrontation, which implies repentance, forgiveness and renewal of heart. Such a conversion is a gift of grace.”

Over the next several months, this column will explore this vital spiritual and theological exercise begun some 20 years ago. Much has been accomplished. Yet challenges and hurdles remain.

But I am confident that the Spirit is at work, and will one day bring us to unity in Christ.

(Father Rick Giethner is director of the archdiocesan Office of Ecumenism. He is also director of the Terre Haute deacon and pastor of St. Patrick and St. Margaret Mary parishes, both in Terre Haute.)
Sunday Readings

Sunday, February 22, 2015

• Genesis 9:8-15
• J. Peter 3:18-22
• Mark 1:12-15

The first reading, from the Book of Genesis, presents the familiar story of Noah. It is a story of contrasts and of the consequences of these contrasts. Noah was faithful to God, and the world almost universally was not. God protected Noah from the doom to which the sinful world succumbed. Warned by God, Noah took his family and pairs of various animals onto a ship, traditionally called the ark, that Noah constructed. As the floodwaters ebbed, the ark settled on dry land. By God’s help, all aboard Noah’s ark survived.

God assures Noah, and all people, that he would never again allow a flood to destroy the Earth. God promises a covenant with Noah’s people. Under this covenant, or solemn agreement, the people would obey God’s law. In turn, God would protect them from peril.

It is the foundational story of all that would be revealed in the long history of salvation. Sin destroys. God gives life itself to the faithful.

The second reading is from the First Epistle of St. Peter. It states that it was composed in Babylon, likely a symbol of Rome, the mighty, magnificent-to-behold imperial capital, but also the center of paganism and of the impious culture of the time.

Roman Christians at the time needed encouragement. This epistle provides such encouragement by recalling the encouragement. This epistle provided

The Church has begun Lent, the most intense period in its year of calling its people to union with God. While Ash Wednesday was the first day of Lent, many Catholics will begin the Lenten process with this weekend’s Mass. The readings call people to face the facts of life as humans, of good and evil, and of the products of good and evil.

Regardless of the exact details of the flood described in Genesis, so often discussed and indeed questioned on scientific grounds, the religious message of Noah and his ark is clear. It supplies a fitting beginning to reflection for Lent. Sin, the willful rejection of God, leads necessarily and always to destruction.

The message of Christ is never, in the end, in vain. The Church’s people are told to come forward, to proclaim that the reign of God will be seen. The Lord calls upon the people to repent. “The time of fulfilment” is at hand ( Mk 1:15). God will be vindicated. Jesus has come to set everything in balance. The sinful will be laid low. The good will endure.

The Gospel of St. John used less in Sunday Mass readings than other Gospels

Q must confess first to a bias because John the Evangelist is my baptismal patron saint, but I have always wondered why—in the A, B and C cycles of Scriptural readings for Sunday Mass—the rotation includes only the Gospels written by Matthew, Mark and Luke (Wisconsin)

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The second reading is from the First Epistle of St. Peter. It states that it was composed in Babylon, likely a symbol of Rome, the mighty, magnificent-to-behold imperial capital, but also the center of paganism and of the impious culture of the time.

Roman Christians at the time needed encouragement. This epistle provides such encouragement by recalling the encouragement. This epistle provided

The Church has begun Lent, the most intense period in its year of calling its people to union with God. While Ash Wednesday was the first day of Lent, many Catholics will begin the Lenten process with this weekend’s Mass. The readings call people to face the facts of life as humans, of good and evil, and of the products of good and evil.

Regardless of the exact details of the flood described in Genesis, so often discussed and indeed questioned on scientific grounds, the religious message of Noah and his ark is clear. It supplies a fitting beginning to reflection for Lent. Sin, the willful rejection of God, leads necessarily and always to destruction.

The message of Christ is never, in the end, in vain. The Church’s people are told to come forward, to proclaim that the reign of God will be seen. The Lord calls upon the people to repent. “The time of fulfilment” is at hand ( Mk 1:15). God will be vindicated. Jesus has come to set everything in balance. The sinful will be laid low. The good will endure.

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Rest in peace

University of Louisville
Pope Francis prays in front of a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes as he begins his general audience in St. Peter’s Square at the Vatican on Feb. 15, the memorial of Our Lady of Lourdes. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

Franciscan Sister Alice Ann Deardorff served in Catholic schools for more than 50 years

Franciscan Sister Alice Ann Deardorff died on Jan. 23 at the motherhouse of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis in Oldenburg. She was 89.

The Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated on Jan. 26 at the Motherhouse Chapel in Oldenburg. Burial followed at the sisters’ cemetery.

Rita Ann Deardorff was born on May 19, 1925, in Indianapolis. Prior to entering the Sisters of St. Francis, she attended St. Joan of Arc, School and the former St. Mary Academy, both in Indianapolis.

She entered the Sisters of St. Francis on Feb. 2, 1947, and professed final vows on Aug. 12, 1952.

During 67 years as a Sister of St. Francis, Sister Alice Ann ministered as an educator for more than 50 years in Catholic schools in Indiana, Missouri and Ohio. In the archdiocese, she served in Indianapolis at St. Mark the Evangelist School from 1958-61, Our Lady of Lourdes School from 1963-68, the former Holy Trinity School from 1970-75 and at St. Therese of the Infant Jesus (Little Flower) School from 1975-84. She continued serving in Indianapolis as a substitute teacher from 1984-2000.

Sister Alice Ann returned to the motherhouse in 2000, where she served in pastoral care and community service until she retired and was ministered to by prayer in 2008.

Memorial gifts may be sent to the Sisters of St. Francis, P.O. Box 100, Oldenburg, IN 47036-0100.

Ursuline Sister Anthony Wargel ministered as an educator in Catholic schools for more than 60 years

Ursuline Sister Anthony Wargel died on Jan. 24 at Mercy Sacred Heart nursing home in Louisville, Ky. She was 100.

The Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated on Jan. 30 at the Motherhouse Chapel for the Ursuline Sisters of Louisville. Burial followed at St. Michael Cemetery in Indianapolis in a section designated for the Ursuline Sisters.

Claret Marie Wargel was born on July 17, 1914, in Evansville, Ind.

She entered the Ursuline Sisters of Louisville on April 23, 1932. Sister Anthony earned a bachelor’s degree from the former Ursuline College in Louisville; a master’s degree from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh and did further studies at Marquette University in Milwaukee.

During 83 years as a member of the Ursuline Sisters of Louisville, Sister Anthony ministered as an educator for more than 60 years in Catholic schools in Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Pennsylvania, South Carolina and West Virginia. In the archdiocese, she served at the former St. Mary School in Madison from 1948-50.

She remained an active tutor until 91. And from 2005-14, she led rosary prayer services and repaired rosaries in nursing homes.

Sister Alice Ann returned to the motherhouse in 2000, where she served in pastoral care and community service until she retired and devoted herself to prayer in 2008.

Memorial gifts may be sent to Ursuline Sisters, Mission Advancement Office, 3105 Lexington Road, Louisville, KY 40206.

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MARTOPAOLI, Dorothy, 80, St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Bright, Jan. 19. Mother of Terris Eidam. Great-grandmother of one.


WEISS, Marilyn R., 91, St. Augustine, Evansville, Ind. (Ryan) Miles, Margaret Jane, 83, St. Augustine, Evansville, Ind., 1958-61, Our Lady of Lourdes School from 1961-68, the former Holy Trinity School from 1970-75 and at St. Therese of the Infant Jesus (Little Flower) School from 1975-84. She continued serving in Indianapolis as a substitute teacher from 1984-2000.

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Lenten penance services are scheduled at archdiocesan parishes

Parishes throughout the archdiocese have scheduled communal penance services for Lent. The following list of services was reported to The Criterion.

Batesville Deaney
• Feb. 23, 6:30 p.m. at St. Catherine of Siena, Decatur County, Enochsburg campus
• Feb. 26, 7 p.m. at St. Mary, Greensburg
• March 1, 1-3 p.m. at Immaculate Conception, Millhouses
• March 6, 10 a.m.-10 p.m. at All Saints, Dearborn County, St. Martin Campus (individual confession)
• March 18, 6:30 p.m. at St. Peter, Franklin County
• March 18, 6:30 p.m. at St. Michael, Brookville
• March 21, 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. at St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Bright

Bloomington Deaney
• March 10, 7 p.m. at St. Agnes, Nashville
• March 19, 7 p.m. at St. Vincent de Paul, Bedford
• March 24, 7 p.m. at St. Martin of Tours, Martinsville
• March 25, 6:30 p.m. at St. Jude, Spencer
• March 26, 6 p.m. at St. John the Apostle, Bloomington
• April 1, 4 p.m. at St. Paul Catholic Center, Bloomington

Connersville Deaney
• March 3, 7 p.m. at St. Elizabeth of Hungary, Cambridge City
• April 3, 6:30-8:30 p.m., “The Light Is on for You.” Individual confessions offered at all deanery parishes.

Indianapolis East Deaney
• March 11, 7:30 p.m. at Holy Spirit
• March 24, 7 p.m. at St. Thomas, Fortville
• March 25, 7 p.m. at St. Mary

Indianapolis North Deaney
• March 15, 2-3:30 p.m. at Matthew the Apostle
• March 16, 7:30-8 p.m. at St. Joan of Arc
• March 17, 7:30-8:30 p.m. at St. Joan of Arc

Indianapolis South Deaney
• March 4, 6:30-8:30 p.m., “The Light Is on for You.” Individual confessions offered at all deanery parishes.
• March 16, 7 p.m. at Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ

Farming family uses contest winnings to help St. Mary School in Rushville

By John Shaugnessy

Having the winning entry in a contest not only shocked Jeff and Dana Fussner, it also led to a nice surprise for the principal of St. Mary School.

The Fussners, a Rush County farming family, recently entered the America’s Farmers Grow Communities contest, sponsored when the 55-year-old Rush County farmer’s entry won the $2,500 to the charity of their choice. After thinking about it, the Fussners discovered that Jeff has never won anything. So they were stunned when the principal of St. Mary School, Cheryl Cech, called to say that they had won the contest.

The donation was a welcomed surprise for the principal, Cheryl Cech, who said, “There’s a whole bunch of places where it could have come out of there, and [Catholic] schools always have been put to good, but we thought this would be a good one.”

Cech said that it was a great surprise for the school and that she also appreciated the Fussners’ generosity. Both of them were grateful to have won the contest and were able to help the school.

The school principal expressed how much they appreciated the Fussners’ donation and how it will be used to help the school.

The Fussners expressed their gratitude for the principal and the school and how much they appreciated the opportunity to help.

Lenten activities available online

Be sure to visit The Criterion’s Lent web page at www.archindy.org/lent

The page consists of links to daily readings, archived Lenten columns by Archbishop Emeritus Daniel M. Buechlein, a full list of communal penance services taking place at parishes and other features.

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envision that another reality would also soon have a lasting place in her mind. It’s her story of great love in the midst of great loss.

“I listened, but I couldn’t hear God”
Overwhelmed with grief about her miscarriage, Lauren initially “walked around numb” and cried herself to sleep before she visited a place that has often offered her peace and solace in her life.

“I was always taught to turn to God in times of struggle,” says the member of St. Bartholomew Parish in Columbus. “So the next morning, I went to our church and sat in the Blessed Sacrament chapel. I sat in the quiet and wept and prayed. I began praying the rosary, looking for comfort. I began to think about Mary. She was a mother, just like me. She would understand my grief and take it to the Lord. I wanted God to tell me why this had happened to us.”

She insists that she wasn’t mad at God, “just sad and confused.”

“Surely he had a reason,” she says. “We had prayed for this baby. We had truly and deeply loved our unborn child. We had excitedly shared the news with everyone. The next day, I was scheduled to go into the hospital to deliver. So I sat in the chapel on what I knew would be my last day with my baby. Even though his or her life was already gone, the idea of being separated from him or her seemed to be a terrible thing. I couldn’t imagine life without him or her. The thought of losing my baby was too much for me to bear. I wanted God to tell me why.”

She wondered, “Why wasn’t he sending the light I was so desperately searching for? Why was he not sending the light I needed to see the darkness of my life? I was a mother, just like me. She would understand my grief and take it to the Lord. I wanted God to tell me why this had happened to us.”

“With each kind word, the darkness turned to gray, and I thought that maybe my grief would not suffocate me. I was not alone. We were deeply loved.”

As the weeks have passed, the heartbreakingly loss of their child and the healing love of so many have evolved into “a new normal” for their family, Lauren says.

“I made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for my girls, folded towels and watched TV after bedtime stories,” she notes. “But in our new normal, my grief would sneak up on me at random times during the day. For a few minutes, and sometimes hours, my grief would overwhelm me, and the tears would flow. But there was something else different about our new normal. It was so full of love, kindness and support that I could hardly believe it.

“Our marriage felt stronger and more precious than ever. On the worst day of our lives, we had each other. My husband saw the weakest and ugliest parts of me that day in the hospital. He held my hand the entire time and whispered words of encouragement. Then he held together the pieces of my broken heart in the dark days that followed. In our new normal, we were reminded why marriage is a sacrament, a vocation.”

She also views her daughters in a different light.

“We had never felt so loved”
“I had loved them both beyond words from the minute the pregnancy tests read positive. But now I began to see them through God’s eyes. They were our greatest gifts from God, meant to be protected and cherished.”

Through it all, Lauren has seen her own faith grow because of the faith and the prayers of all the friends, family members and co-workers who rushed to support them.

“We were covered in Christ-like friendship and blessings,” she says.

“Through my husband, my daughters, our family and friends, I saw the light of God again. I saw the light of God shine brighter than I had ever had, through the goodness and love of others.”

“It’s strange that during our darkest grief, we had never felt so loved. It brings new meaning to one of my favorite sayings, ‘God is good. all the time. God is good.’”

(Has faith made a difference in your family’s life? Has it deepened your relationship as a parent, a grandparent, a sibling, a son or a daughter? Do you have rituals and experiences of faith that have helped to make your family more Christ-centered? If so, we’d like to hear about it.

Please send your responses and your stories to assistant editor John Shaugnessy by e-mail at jshaughnessy@archindy.org or by mail in care of The Criterion, 1400 N. Meridian St., Indianapolis, IN 46202. Please include your parish and a daytime phone number where you can be reached.)

Pope Benedict has no regret, doubt says

VATICAN CITY (CNS)—Retired Pope Benedict XVI has never doubted or regretted his decision to resign, knowing it was the right thing to do for the good of the Church, said Archbishop Georg Ganswein, prefect of the papal household and personal secretary to the retired pope.

“The Church needs a strong helmsman,” and Pope Benedict was keenly aware of his own waning strength while faced with such a demanding ministry, the archbishop said in an interview published on Feb. 12 in the Italian daily Corriere della Sera.

Two years after Pope Benedict’s historic announcement on Feb. 11 in step down as supreme pontiff, Archbishop Ganswein said the retired pope “is convinced that the decision he made and announced was the right one. He has no doubt.

“He is very serene and certain in this: His decision was necessary and made after having repeatedly examined my conscience before God,” he said, citing words from the pope’s Feb. 11, 2013, announcement.

Pope Benedict had told a stunned audience of cardinals assembled for an ordinary public consistory that “I have come to the certainty that my strength, due to an advanced age, are no longer suited to an adequate exercise of the Petrine ministry.”

Archbishop Ganswein said in the interview that Pope Benedict was aware of his “duty not to look out for his own self but for the good of the Church.”

The pope spelled out the precise reasons for his decision, the archbishop said, and “all the other considerations and hypotheses are wrong,” including assumptions that the pope’s resignation was not valid or had not been done in full freedom.

“Hypotheses cannot be based on things that are not true and totally absurd,” Archbishop Ganswein said. “Benedict himself said he made his decision with freedom, without any pressure, and he assured his ‘reverence and obedience’ to the new pope.”

The archbishop said doubts about the validity of the resignation and subsequent election of Pope Francis stem from a lack of understanding of the Church.

Also, the option for a pope to resign is explicitly written in the Code of Canon Law, which says a pope may step down as long as the decision is made freely and “duly manifested.”

Archbishop Ganswein said Pope Benedict, who will turn 88 in April, is still following the prayerful, quiet life he wanted to dedicate himself to after his retirement.

Like his namesake, St. Benedict—the father of Western monasticism—the retired pope “has chosen a monastic life. He goes out [in public] only when Pope Francis asks him to; as for the rest, he does not accept other invitations,” said the archbishop, who lives with retired Pope Benedict in a renovated monastery and has been his personal secretary since 2003.

Archbishop Ganswein told the newspaper that in addition to the pope’s usual routine of prayer, reading, keeping up with correspondence, receiving visitors, watching the evening news and walking in the Vatican Gardens, he has been playing the piano much more often: “Mozart especially, but also other compositions that come to mind at the moment; he plays from memory.”

The only health issues, the archbishop said, are “every now and then his legs give him some problems, that’s all.” The pope, who has had a pacemaker for several years and uses a cane, still has an incredibly sharp mind, the archbishop added.

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