

Every child is God's gift

If you ask Marcy and Jerry Katcher about their family they'll be quick to tell you that God does not make mistakes and that every child is a gift from God. Marcy and Jerry have six children ranging in age from 4 to 20; three are adopted and one has serious medical issues. Their story is rooted in their marriage vows, particularly the vow to accept children lovingly from God.

Sacraments are meant to transform us. In the case of the Katchers, the Sacrament of Matrimony did just that. Originally the pair married in the Lutheran Church, Marcy's faith tradition. She admitted that she wasn't into her faith back then. "I had a lot of misconceptions and a lot of discomfort with the Catholic Church," she said. That all changed for Marcy when the couple prepared to have their first child Andy baptized.



The Katcher family clock-wise from top: Jerry holding Brady, 4, Marcy, Andy, 20, Audrey, 18, JJ, 16, Lucy (seated) 16, Charlie, 14.

A change of heart

At the time, Marcy was invited to join RCIA, and she consented simply to have facts about the Catholic faith. During the RCIA process the couple decided to celebrate the Sacrament of Matrimony in the Catholic Church. Marcy cited the grace from the sacrament and the vow to accept children lovingly from God for changing the course of their lives. "I believe that this grace is what helps us to accept God's plan for our marriage, and it was God's timing," she said.

Audrey was born 17 months later with significant medical needs. She required five heart surgeries, and another on her hip. Audrey would be diagnosed with Mitochondrial Disease, which meant Jerry and Marcy had a 50 percent chance of passing on the condition to future children. Fully aware of their wedding vows and the enormity of Audrey's condition, they decided to postpone having more children of their own and to adopt an infant instead. Marcy explained, "We wanted a young baby because Audrey was medically fragile and we thought it was what we

could handle." Because it takes so long to adopt a healthy white infant in the United States, the couple decided to go with a foreign adoption. Andy was four at the time.

'God doesn't make mistakes.'

Lucy was adopted at the age of four months from Vietnam with Jerry making the trip to bring her home. "I got her on my birthday!" he said. Marcy stayed behind to take care of Audrey and Andy.

All in God's time

Time went by and Jerry and Marcy decided they wanted to adopt again. Marcy said, "We were open to kids that might not otherwise be adopted." Jerry added, "We basically thought at that point that we could handle a harder child."

Marcy said they decided to use the county adoption system; however this took longer. "We are so used to getting something right away. The foreign

adoption was really different from the county adoption. Foreign adoptions always go in order [of the next available child]. With the county adoption, they are trying to get the best parents they can possibly find for that child," she said.

The Katchers found there were far more applicants for healthy infants than there were for children with special needs or sibling groups. Marcy explained that for every healthy baby there'd be hundreds of applications. On the other hand, for sibling groups or children with special needs there are far fewer adoptive parents available.

A complicated process

The Katchers were among those rare adoptive parents. In a turn of events some might see as coincidence, Marcy and Jerry see the hand of God at work. Working through a local private agency gave the pair access to county adoption agencies across the United States, increasing their opportunities to adopt. While in Toledo, a friend happened to meet a visiting social worker who

represented the adoption agency of Hillsborough County, Florida. The friend passed along the Katchers' name to the visiting social worker.

The social worker from Florida then received the couple's home study, an assessment that determines a couple's suitability to adopt, and considered them likely candidates for three different sibling groups. "In the meantime we had attended a class on multicultural and multiracial adoption, and already had a child of another race," Marcy said. JJ and Charlie, who were in foster care in the Tampa area, just happened to be African American. Thus a match was made between the Katchers and JJ and Charlie, ages 5 and 3 respectively.

At about the same time, Marcy yearned to have all her children in a Catholic school, a Christian environment. Residents of Richfield, the Katchers had Andy at Assumption School in Broadview Heights and Audrey attended school in the Revere District. Lucy was not yet in kindergarten.

Marcy was researching nationally children with special needs going to Catholic school because typically children with disabilities attended public schools where they could get necessary services. Marcy met with Dr. Pat Nugent, then principal of St. Hilary, where there was already a student with Down syndrome. At the time, Audrey was delayed mentally and educationally, still used a feeding tube and was medically fragile, Marcy explained.

"Dr. Nugent said, 'yes, we can accept Audrey and meet her needs.' And I was overjoyed because I felt that a Catholic school should want to have a child with disabilities. At the time," Marcy continued, "I got out to the car and had a message on my phone: 'You were chosen for the two boys.' I think that God planned this. We were meant to have these two children and have them at St. Hilary."



The Katcher children enjoy the best Christmas present—baby brother Brady, complete with gift wrap. From left: JJ, Audrey, Andy, Lucy and Charlie.

A form of witness

Marcy acknowledged that while it was important for Audrey to be able to have a Catholic education, it was just as important for students at St. Hilary to be around and become friends with a child with disabilities like Audrey. "It was important for her witness," said Marcy, "part of God's plan to have her there." Jerry added, "I went to Catholic school for 12 years and never saw kids with special needs."

A few years after the Katchers adopted JJ and Charlie, Marcy took Audrey for an eye doctor's appointment at Cleveland Clinic. The ophthalmologist there questioned her original diagnosis—Mitochondrial Disease. Instead he thought Audrey had Kabuki Syndrome which has some of the same symptoms as Mitochondrial Disease. Marcy thought it strange that an ophthalmologist would comment on a condition that was hereditary until she learned he had a degree in genetics. His suspicions led the family to have Audrey tested again and to their surprise, she did indeed have Kabuki Syndrome—which was not hereditary. "Again, this is God's work," said Marcy.

A new baby

This news changed everything for the Katchers. Their wedding vows to accept children from God came into view while the grave reason for postponing a pregnancy vanished. "So we were blessed to become pregnant with Brady, and I was 43," said Marcy. Brady will soon turn five.

Some years ago, Marcy learned that 90 percent of babies with serious disabilities like Audrey's are aborted. She took it upon herself to convince others that God does not make mistakes and that every child is a gift from God by giving talks for Right to Life to seventh grade classes. She knows their life would be different if it weren't for Audrey.

"To tie it up," said Marcy, "if we didn't have Audrey we wouldn't have adopted and might not have adopted kids in foster care because we already had a child with challenges. Because God gave us Audrey, we became less self-centered. We opened our hearts to the gift of children."

Men's retreat *transforms* lives for Christ

Are you looking for a way to jumpstart your spiritual batteries? The parish offers many such opportunities, including the Christ Renews His Parish (CRHP) men's retreat November 12-13 at Loyola Retreat House in Green. A relatively new event, this is the second of its kind for men in the parish. The first CRHP retreat for women took place last May and will be offered again in the spring.

According to Fr. Steve Brunovsky, "The value of the retreat is to provide an experience for men and women to awaken their faith by an intentional desire to grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ. It is also an experience that provides the team support to grow in faith with others. It is also very powerful for participants to then give that experience of renewal to the next group."

One of those who found the renewal especially powerful is Bill Wolf, who attended the first renewal a year ago. "I have always marveled at the ease with which some of my fellow parishioners live their faith, and incorporate that faith into the way they live their day-to-day lives. I attended the renewal in part, to see how I could become more like them. What I learned is that God does not need me to be someone else—He wants me to grow in my faith, and the expression of that faith, being who I am.

"Another reason for attending the renewal in the first place was to meet other men of the parish who were looking to grow in their faith. (Faith is not a topic that is easily discussed among men, especially outside of a parish setting.) I felt called to participate on the second renewal team as a means to contribute the growth in my faith that had started on the renewal weekend—I have found that faith is nourished best in community with others," said Bill.

"My hope for those who participate in the upcoming CRHP weekend is that they recognize anew the presence of Christ in their own lives, regardless of where they are right now spiritually," he continued. "God yearns for a personal relationship with us, and He calls each of us to offer our unique selves in service to Him. My hope is that each



Mike Snyder and Bill Wolf pray during a CRHP team meeting.

of us who participate may come to a clearer understanding of that calling and say 'yes' to God's personal invitation of friendship," Bill said.

Randy Malick, Director of Faith Formation for Adults, served on the team that brought CRHP to St. Hilary. "The impact on both the team and participants was incredible," he observed. "To witness how Jesus has made himself real in the lives of all involved is inspiring and motivational. The team formation only deepens that experience, and we're anxious to share in an increasing way how God is alive and active in our lives to build up and encourage the men who attend the weekend."

St. Hilary might not have had the CRHP weekend had Fr. Steve not experienced it as a teenager. "I pursued bringing CRHP to St. Hilary because I myself attended the youth CRHP at my home parish of St. Columbkille when I was in high school, and it had a profound effect on me. I believe that I would not be a priest today if it were not for the spiritual awakening that occurred for me through the CRHP retreat. I have also been at two parishes that had CRHP for men and women and have seen the spiritual awakening that has occurred in their lives due to attending the CRHP retreat!" Attending CRHP also impacted Mike Snyder's relationship with Christ. "I had

always considered myself spiritual even when I was away from the Church. Religion had mostly been about intellectual contemplation, but after the retreat I felt more emotion and need for more emotion in my prayer life. I was able to look through the rearview mirror of my life and saw many times where the hand of God had directed me toward people that would be important in my faith journey," said Mike.

As a result of attending the retreat, Mike said he found himself turning off the radio more and listening for a daily calling. "I am more grateful for things in life including challenges. I recognize more of where I have fallen short of the ideal for me and am more willing to forgive myself for my sins and other failings.

"I really appreciate more people in my life than before. You don't realize how many people are thinking about YOU until you participate in something like this. I am part of a cheering section for people in our parish and I know that I have a cheering section in the parish for me and my family," he said.

If you're thinking about attending the next men's CRHP weekend, contact Randy at (330) 867-1055, ext. 209.



Dan Samide's journey to priesthood

'my vocational path to happiness was not a problem to be solved but a call to be answered'

Life has a way of coming full circle. Just ask Seminarian Dan Samide, who is interning at St. Hilary for the next six months. Dan grew up at St. Mary parish in Hudson at the same time that Fr. Steve Brunovsky served there as associate pastor. As such Fr. Steve gave him First Communion, and was there for Dan's First Reconciliation. At that young age priesthood was not on Dan's radar. "And now we're roommates!" Dan quips.

While St. Hilary is a stop along the path to priesthood, Dan points to involvement in Life Teen at St. Mary, particularly a Life Teen Leadership Conference at the University of Notre Dame, that made all the difference in his choice of college and his spiritual journey. "It was a transformative week. I was at a pivotal point in my faith where it went from something my family did, to something I thought was important," he recalled.

Through high school Dan remained active in Life Teen and in his faith. "People brought up the idea of my becoming a priest. My brother was already headed toward the priesthood and was in the seminary. Others were telling me I could be a doctor or engineer. I was always good in math and science and entered Notre Dame as a chemical engineering student," said Dan.

After two years, however, things changed. He explained, "In the spring of my sophomore year I was doing well in my classes, and realized that if I wanted to excel I'd have to put in more time. I took a course on careers in chemical engineering and realized I didn't want to do any of those things. I wanted to go into theology—not necessarily the priesthood. I didn't have vocational clarity at that point.

"My mom had the idea that I could do a science or business major and minor in theology. I started that my junior year, but wasn't enjoying those classes. I just couldn't picture it job-wise."

At this point he was praying a lot and attending adoration twice a week.

"When I would pray in front of the Eucharist—that topic [his vocation] kept coming up. One day I was praying in the chapel and my shift ended. I was walking out of the building and that's when I had a clear answer. The message was *You are more than the sum of your talents*. My aptitude, my talent indicated math and science. I realized my vocational path to happiness was not a problem to be solved, but a call to be answered.

"It was instantaneous—that I'd pursue theology as a ministry or as a priest. At the time I thought I'd be a full time youth minister. The summer

before my senior year I had a lot of experiences and conversations that led me to pursuing priesthood. I had spent the summer doing youth ministry and people saw something in me that I didn't see, but I prayed about it." Dan explained that he expected people would recognize his potential as a youth minister—but what they saw in him was a young man who could become a priest and encouraged him to pursue it. He graduated from the University of Notre Dame with a degree in theology and entered St. Mary Seminary.

An internship at St. Hilary was made to order for Dan, who was looking for a large parish with lots of ministries and a school. "I like to be around people, and I'm happy to be here, where there's always a meeting to attend. I want to be able to learn from Fr. Steve about the things you don't learn in theology class—the ins and outs of life as a priest. And I'm a public school kid, so I wanted the experience of a Catholic school," he said.

As an intern Dan plans to help with the high school youth group and lead some of the XLT! (Exalt) events. While he's here to learn about the ins and outs of parish life, he also likes to have fun. He loves a bonfire no matter what the season with no cell phones, just friends and lots of conversation and laughter. Dan is also into ultimate Frisbee.



Sarah Swafford is a nationally recognized Catholic speaker on the topic of chastity.

Take Sarah's Virtue Challenge

Sarah maintains that it is the development of virtues or striving toward them that makes one "simply irresistible" to someone of the opposite sex. On her website, www.emotionalvirtue.com, Sarah offers the Virtue Challenge. Here it is in a nutshell:

1. Pick a virtue and write it down.
2. List three practical ways that you are going to grow in that virtue during the week.
3. List three obstacles that could get in the way, so you are ready for them.
4. Share this activity with a close friend to help keep you accountable.
5. Before bed each night evaluate how well you lived out that virtue.
6. At the end of the week, share your experiences with the friend to celebrate your victories or seek advice on how to improve.
7. Pick out a new virtue to work on or continue with the same one and repeat the process.

Speaker to take teens off emotional roller coaster

Faith, hope, and love are the three virtues that last, according to St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians. For many teens, however, finding lasting love and putting it into practice where dating is concerned can be a confusing thing, let alone establishing a love relationship that leads to marriage. Enter Sarah Swafford, nationally recognized Catholic speaker on chastity and author of the book *Emotional Virtue*. Swafford will address teens and parents October 26 at 6:30 p.m. in the church. Her talk is titled, *Emotional Virtues for a Drama-Free Life*.

Targeting the battle within

The talk addresses the attack on human emotions, especially relationships, from a variety of sources. According to the EmotionalVirtue.com, "Sarah targets this battle within by setting forth a vision of virtue in the twenty-first century, one that focuses on beginning with the end in mind, building what will last, and staying off the 'emoticoaster.'"

"This is an opportunity for young people to encounter Christ," said Mary Bacher, Director of Faith Formation for Teens and Young Adults. "I want them to have as much exposure as possible to the Catholic perspective on chastity. It's important to expose them to the truth. Sarah Swafford talks about practical ways of navigating the pressures of the world," explained Mary.

'This is an opportunity
for young people to
encounter Christ.'

Sarah is part of the Chastity Project, whose cofounder, Jason Evert, spoke at St. Hilary two years ago. She has appeared on EWTN's *Life on the Rock* and *EWTN Live*, and co-hosts *At the Heart of Relationships*.

Theology of the Body

Sarah's presentation dovetails with a weekly video program for teens this fall called *You. Life, Love and the Theology of the Body*. *Theology of the Body* encompasses St. Pope John Paul II's teachings on sexuality, marriage, and family life. The Wednesday evening video series frames those teachings in a way that's relevant to teens, focusing on identity, gender, love, and relationships. The videos feature Brian Butler and husband and wife team Jason and Crystalina Evert. The series also includes presentations by parishioners Jason and Julia Solomon who share their experiences living out these teachings.

According to Jeannie Hohlefelder, Director of Faith Formation for Children, "Sarah Swafford is a living example of Theology of the Body modeled for young people. She presents her story of how to live a chaste life.

"I think that the idea that being precious and valued, and where one finds that value, is so important. Does one find their value among the noise of society or with your Father—God? The topic of chastity is transformative because it is one piece of a puzzle of where you find your value and how you're called to live your life. And we're all called to live a life of chastity."

Companions on a Journey is a life preserver

Arline Sobek was just days from retiring from her job in a doctor's office when her husband became terribly ill even though he had never been sick. He had retired the previous September and she wished she had retired when he did. Andrew wasn't feeling well and they spoke on the phone during the day while she was at work. She took him to the doctor the next morning. From the doctor's office they went to the emergency room.

Losing Andrew

"He couldn't breathe and he looked like the Michelin man," said Arline. Late that night she said goodnight to her husband, who was now in the intensive care unit, and went home. Around 2:30 a.m. she got a call from the hospital asking permission to put a tube down his throat to ease his breathing and to give him a blood transfusion. "They put him under, but he never woke up. I never got to speak to him again," she recalled.

He had two surgeries in one week and several transfusions. For the next 31 days Arline stayed by Andrew's side from morning till night. He had cysts on his kidneys and an infection. "He's a very sick man," a doctor told Arline.

Grief Support

After taking him off life support 31 days later, Andrew passed away May 23, 2013. They had been married for 45 years and Arline was devastated. That's when Patti Kelleher, St. Hilary parishioner and grief counselor entered Arline's life. Nick Ciriello of Ciriello and Carr Funeral Home suggested Arline meet with Patti.



Andrew and Arline Sobek at a happier time.

Their meetings helped ease the immediate emotional pain of Arline's loss and led her to join Companions on a Journey, a newly formed bereavement support group cosponsored by the funeral home and the parish.

Companions on a Journey

Companions on a Journey is a two part series, each of which meets for eight weeks, that helps participants cope with the death of a loved one. It is facilitated by Patti, who is also a licensed social worker, certified bereavement counselor and chaplain, and Beth Rado, St. Hilary's pastoral minister. Part one, Support During Grief and Loss, provides the nuts and bolts of the grief process.

Patti explained, "In our first session we cover basic information such as, what is grief, why we grieve, and why grief is good for you. Even if one has lost more than one person in their life

each experience is different for the relationship has been different."

Part two, called Healing Our Grieving Hearts, "focuses on creating a new normal," said Patti. "We also discuss secondary losses, which is a surprise for most people. This involves a plethora of topics," she added. For example, one might lose a spouse (primary loss), but also experience the loss of a chosen lifestyle (once married, now single); the loss of financial security (have to sell the house); the loss of self-confidence in decision making. Each secondary loss must be addressed and grieved.

Crying, laughing together

Describing their meetings, Arline said, "During the first part we would introduce ourselves and talk about our loved ones because after a while other people would go on with their lives and not mention them. We'd cry

together and laugh a lot. In the second half we learned what grief was—that it never ends, but we learn to deal with it. Everyone grieves differently. It does not end in a week or a month, but you come to learn to live with it, deal with it, heal with it.”

While generally the same group meets for the entire series, two meetings are open to anyone who'd like to attend. The November 10 meeting, *Coping with the Holidays*, focuses on Thanksgiving. On December 15, the topic is *Coping with the Holidays: Christmas*. Patti explained that these sessions “are so important, for holidays and families go hand in hand, and now that the family has been fractured by the death, much pain is felt by all. Holidays are not necessarily just Thanksgiving and Christmas, but might be special occasions unique to a particular family.”

Going Forward

For those who have completed both parts of *Companions on a Journey*, the parish offers *Going Forward*, which meets once a month. The next meetings are November 2 and December 7 from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

“*Companions on a Journey* saved me,” said Arline. “I was drowning in my sorrow. I couldn't eat or sleep. We shared our experiences, stories and pictures. We got to know each other and our loved ones who died.”

One of the things they learned was to put personal treasures of their loved one in a memory box. “Mine's a shadow box hanging on the wall,” she said. Pinned inside is a card from the funeral home, Andrew's college and high school rings, his Sea Bees patch, driver's license, glasses, pocket knife, a little dragon (because he liked dragons), a scrimshaw tie tack, the tassel from his master's degree, a pay stub, and a college medallion. “I buy fresh roses each week because it's what we always did for each other,” said Arline.

‘Companions on a Journey was my life preserver as I felt like I was drowning in my grief when my husband died.’

Keeping treasured memories

“Memory boxes are so important for the grieving. In the boxes are placed special treasures of their loved one,” said Patti. “Basically these items are their legacy, and speak to who they are. It is also something we can hold and cherish when we are really in need of feeling their love.”

Along the way, Arline's faith was tested. “Everyone expected a miracle for their loved one and that prayer wasn't answered. God does hear everyone's prayer, but doesn't answer it the way we want it answered. I learned this later by living through it,” she said.

Witnessing faith

At times it was Arline's friends from *Companions on the Journey* that bolstered her faith. “I was upset with God. Witnessing their faith has humbled me and made me stronger. Some are so faith filled. One of the things I learned was that God has big shoulders. He waits on us. He waited on me for a long time,” she said.

Arline especially appreciates the support from group members that extends beyond their meetings. “We call each other, remember the anniversary of a loved one's death, and friends' birthdays because others forget,” said Arline, “and we want to honor the loved one who died. I don't ever want to forget that Andy lived. It helps deal with the loneliness.”

Arline admits that she's come a long way since her husband died. “Two years ago I couldn't talk about it.” Now she's able to share her experiences and is writing poetry, some of which she shared with her group.

“*Companions on a Journey* was my life preserver as I felt I was drowning in my grief when my husband died, but sharing these weekly sessions with others who have lost a loved one has helped me on my journey to healing. We learned how to walk through our grief by sharing experiences, talking about our loved one, crying and laughing together. In these sessions we have become more than companions—we have become dear friends on our journey to healing,” said Arline.



Hole in My Heart

By Arline Sobek

There's a hole in my heart that you can't see
Because my love was taken from me

I prayed and asked that he might live
But that wasn't the answer that God did give

The time had come to let him go
That's when the tears began to flow

I couldn't believe the smile on his face
As the angels took him to that heavenly place

We were together for many years
Now all that's left are memories and tears

My anger at God has lessened some
I hope some day the peace will come

There's a hole in my heart that you can't see
Because my love was taken from me.

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Bi-monthly newsletter of St. Hilary Parish

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