



"There is nothing that anybody can say, other than just to communicate volumes with an embrace and with God's presence through our lives."

Father Paul Jarvis, pastor at Guardian Angels in Chaska

Local

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News from around the archdiocese

Priests respond after Albertville bus crash, Wisconsin fire

By Jessica Zimanske
The Catholic Spirit

Father Peter Richards awoke early Saturday morning to the sound of sirens. Living near an area in St. Michael that has its fair share of traffic, he didn't think twice about the sirens until they didn't stop.

"When I heard the third, fourth, fifth and sixth siren go by, I thought something big had happened," he said.

Soon after, at 6:30 a.m., the Wright County Sheriff's office called to alert him of the tragic bus accident that occurred only a quarter-mile from his church, St. Albert in Albertville.

The bus, filled with Pelican Rapids band members, had overturned as it returned from a trip to Chicago, killing 16-year-old Jessica Weishair of Barnesville.

At the time of the accident, local firefighters were practicing at the fire hall next to the parish, which Father Richards said was "providential."

But the bus accident wasn't the only tragedy that struck Saturday morning. About 100 miles away, at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, three students were killed in a house fire, including Mandy Rief of Chaska.

Officials have not yet determined the cause of the fire, and all smoke alarms were working. Rief was a member of Guardian Angels in Chaska.

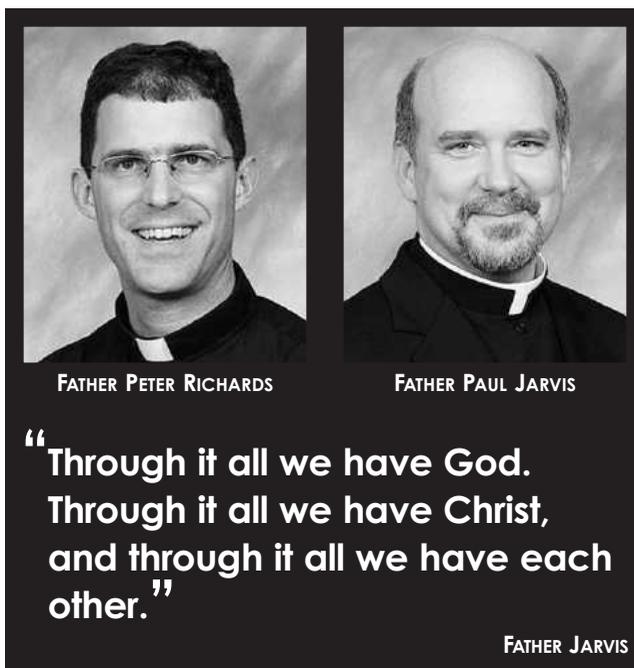
With hundreds of friends and family mourning the loss of innocent lives, priests are often looked to for comfort, guidance and prayer.

Ministry of presence

In Albertville, Father Richards immediately offered his parish center as a site for survivors to rest and to mourn. Nearly 100 people passed through the facility on Saturday to eat a meal donated by a local grocery store or receive support.

Twenty parishioners ministered to those involved with the accident along with the Red Cross. The local Lions Club also donated gas vouchers for parents driving from Pelican Rapids to the accident site.

Father Richards described the scene at St. Albert as



"solemn," as he prayed the Lord's Prayer with the group.

"In terms of what you can do ministry-wise, it was pretty much just being there," he said.

Father Richards, who also is pastor of St. John the Baptist in Dayton, credits his pastoral training in the seminary with learning "the ministry of presence."

"Just seeing the collar is a sense of comfort for them," he said.

He said he hopes that people see that, even through tragedy, such as the death of teenage girl, Christ's love prevails.

"Death is not the end," he said. "Difficult situations, trials and suffering can bring us closer to the Lord."

Father Paul Jarvis, pastor of Guardian Angels in Chaska, was told the news of Rief's death on Saturday morning by the local sheriff's department. At the Riefs' home, he led a prayer for grace during their time of trial.

"There is nothing that anybody can say, other than just to communicate volumes with an embrace and with God's presence through our lives," Father Jarvis said.

The priest, who is new to the Guardian Angels parish, had never met Rief, although he remembers her smile when he gave her Eucharist on Easter Sunday.

Father Jarvis sent a parish-wide e-mail the morning of April 7 to give details on the April 9 funeral service and to offer information on how to support the grieving.

He said that people, including priests, struggle with knowing what to say.

"Now is simply the time to console and love and embrace and pray and celebrate our eternal lives in Christ," he said in the e-mail.

Training never sufficient

Father Jarvis said that in preparation to enter the priesthood, seminarians undergo pastoral care training and also spend a summer working in a hospital or nursing home.

Despite the preparation for dealing with such events, he said each tragedy is like "baptism by fire" in which no amount of training would be sufficient.

"I find that when I am with families at tragic moments like this . . . my heart connects with the family members," Father Jarvis said. "That connection is somehow related to the sense of community, or the body of Christ that we are as a church."

In his homily the day after Rief's death, Father Jarvis compared the Gospel story of the disciples walking to Emmaus with the journey that those grieving must make to see Christ through the tragedy and to continue to have faith.

"We will experience many ups and downs. We will experience joys and sorrows," he said. "But through it all we have God. Through it all we have Christ, and through it all we have each other."

Rief's funeral was to be April 9 at Guardian Angels and Weishair's funeral is set for 2 p.m. April 11 at Pelican Rapids High School.

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