

Formation at Catholic college helps catechist in career, life

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LA CROSSE – If there's one thing that St. Monica, mother of the wayward St. Augustine, knew best, it's this: The single worst thing that can befall a Catholic parent is having their offspring reject the faith in which they were raised.

Gardner, Kan., resident MaryAnn Gardner found herself in just this situation with her son. But like St. Monica she wasn't going to give up without a fight – and like St. Monica she eventually saw her son return to the Catholic faith through the power of prayer.

In her prayers, she asked the Blessed Virgin Mary to wrap her heartache and her son's soul in her mantle – the same one she cradled her own Son with when he was let down from the cross.

"I think about the Blessed Mother and how she wraps a cloak around us, as my mother once told me," Gardner said. "I've always been close to the Blessed Mother. I'd focused on different images of her and made pilgrimages to various Marian shrines. The one image that I kept coming back to was the sorrowful mother – she went through this pain of a child in trouble and she was helpless to do anything about it."

What began as a small group of parents commiserating over the loss of faith among their offspring became an apostolate for Gardner. With the help of her husband Robert Gardner, she began the Marian Mantle Group, a prayer and resource group which helps parents deal with offspring drawn away from the faith by addiction, illicit relationships or other religions.

In hindsight, Gardner realizes that God and His mother were already at work in her life long before the Marian Mantle – prior to even being married and having children.

Gardner attended Mount Mercy College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1963-1967. Located on the northern outskirts of Cedar Rapids, Mount Mercy is a Catholic, four-year college founded by the Sisters of Mercy in 1928.

According to the college's website, "As Mount Mercy has evolved from its beginnings as a junior college to the institution it is today, we have been blessed with many who have helped celebrate our past and shape our future."

As one of those from the college's past, Gardner's own future was in part shaped by Mount Mercy. After receiving her degree with a major in education and minors in home economics and English, she began her career as a school teacher. Then after marrying, she worked as a school volunteer, CCD teacher and scout leader while raising her two sons. After another brief stint as a teacher, she became a technical writer, working in the business world for the past 15 years.

For Gardner, experiences both in and out of the classroom were formative not just for her career path but also her life in Christ.

"My Catholic education at Mount Mercy was the best thing I ever did besides marry Robert," she said. "Mount Mercy affected me far more than in my profession. I could have learned to be a teacher anywhere. But what I learned – especially my theology and philosophy classes, well – I'm not sure I paid enough (in tuition) for what those classes



CT/Contributed photo

MaryAnn Gardner

alone gave me."

The impression Mount Mercy made on Gardner was so deep, she said, "I just insisted that my children had to go to Catholic colleges. I was really intent on that."

It was to her old alma mater that she also owed her ability to ramp up her catechetical expertise. Completing a catechism course with the Marian Catechists, headquartered in the Diocese of La Crosse, Gardner found that her desire to further her catechetical training came from her burning love for the truth that Mount Mercy first ignited in her.

"I wanted a deep solid program," she said, noting that the Marian Catechist course fit that description perfectly. "Some of the material was not as difficult for me since I had the advantage

of a good Catholic college education."

Recalling her college days, she said that her understanding of the faith first deepened when she was challenged at college to wed reason to faith.

"What I received in the way of education in the faith in elementary and high school amounted to 'This is what I have to believe,'" she related. "But at Mount Mercy I began to understand why I believed what I did. This is what settled things in my mind and to this day I carry the faith with me.... It was something I brought to my family, too. I know my children have had an advantage from what I learned at Mount Mercy."

While she was glad that her training at Mount Mercy helped her in bringing up her two boys, she pointed out that it did so in a startling and unexpected way – helping to guide her son back to the faith.

"I had no idea...after my children left home that I would once more be drawing from that Catholic education through my work with the Marian Mantle Group the past three years," she said, explaining that she believes it was through the prayers and work of the Marian Mantle Group that her son eventually returned to the faith, a faith he now fully lives with his wife and family.

Gardner's familiarity with theological issues provided a foundation on which to build her own eight-step, Scripture-based presentation on what parents

can do when faced with an offspring's loss of faith.


"It is designed to help these parents live peace-filled lives so they can work and pray, using practical suggestions for action toward the return of their prodigal loved one to Mass and the sacraments," she explained. "I have also written prayers to be used by those who are praying for prodigal Catholics."

The prayers include a rosary novena, a way of the cross and a parents' litany, all penned by Gardner for Marian Mantle and given an imprimatur and nihil obstat by now-retired Archbishop James P. Keleher of Kansas City, Kan. According to Gardner, Marian Mantle reaches around the country and around the globe, welcoming members in Singapore, Australia and Canada.

"My college experience made me comfortable meeting with people in the community, with religious and clergy," she added. "It is also thoroughly ingrained in me that no one goes through this life alone. It showed me that I am my brother's (and sister's) keeper."

And thanks to the firm foundation in the faith she found in college, she can add her son to that list.


For more information on the Marian Mantle Group, call 913-526-8977 or visit the web site at www.marianmantle.com. For more information on Mount Mercy College, call 1-800-248-4504 or visit the college's web site: www2.mtmercy.edu.



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