

Parents of prodigals find hope in Marian Mantle Group

An interview with founder MaryAnn Gardner

By DAN ROSSINI
Editor

LA CROSSE – Several years ago, MaryAnn Gardner's son stopped practicing his Catholic faith.

Unlike many parents resigned to their situation, she and her husband Bob were determined to doing everything they could to bring him back.

Not finding any easy answers, the couple turned to prayer. As they attended Masses, went on retreats and spent time on pilgrimages, they soon discovered other parents and grandparents with the same heartache.

Recognizing the need for these parents to pray for and support one another in their suffering, Gardner formed the Marian Mantle Group. Their goal, according to the Web site, is "to work and pray together in the hope that every Catholic mother and father will someday see the return of their prodigals to Holy Mother Church."

Though her son has since returned to the faith, Gardner continues her apostolate of reaching out to Catholics whose loved ones no longer go to church.

Catholic Times editor Dan Rossini recently had the opportunity to interview her when she came to give a presentation to Catholic Daughters of the Americas Court #1183 and the La Crosse Deanery Council of Catholic Women at the Cathedral of St. Joseph the Workman.

CT: Why did you choose "Marian Mantle" as the name of your group?

MaryAnn: We had really placed everything under the guidance of the Blessed Mother. I knew the Blessed Mother was very much in the middle of this, because when I started to say to myself, "Where are you going to go for help?" I just got led from one image of Our Lady to another.

Our Lady of Sorrows was the first one that I came to. When I found that picture on the Internet, it touched me. I looked at it, and she knew what I was talking about. So I felt she was somebody to whom I could say, "I need some help here; show me where to go."

CT: How did the group get started?

MaryAnn: It's just crazy how it came together, because I did not set out to do this. It started by meeting other parents who

would pray, say, at a Mass: "This one's not in church," and they'd cry. And I started talking to them afterwards, and I'd say, "I know how you feel."

It was at least a year after that when I wrote those prayers (for parents of prodigals). And I just kept knowing: "Do something." And we talked about it, and I said to my husband, "Bob, I can't do this. You don't get up and tell the world what's going on."

And then one day I was at a Marian conference in Parkville, Missouri, and I don't recall any speaker that said anything particularly, but just that day, I kind of had in my mind what the center of the talk would be if I ever gave one. All of a sudden I knew how I was going to begin it and how I was going to end it. It was just like it fell into place.

CT: You talk like everyone has a prodigal.

MaryAnn: They do. Not necessarily a prodigal child, but every family – and I'll tell you, if any family searches just a little bit, there's somebody there who isn't going to church. And I'm not the only one who feels this way. Look at some of the stuff that Scott Hahn has said. He's the one who gave the statistics about that second largest religious group in the United States is non-practicing Catholics. It used to be Baptists. It isn't anymore; it's non-practicing Catholics.

Once in a while, I'll have somebody who will say to me, "Well, we don't have that problem. All of our children are practicing Catholics." And I remember one woman in particular. She said, "I have 21 little grandchildren." I wanted so badly to say, "Pray for those grandchildren, because they're going into a world that's going to make it more and more difficult."

I just cringe when somebody says, "Well we don't have that problem" because I just see Evil standing there saying, "Well, now. We'll just work on that family because they're not expecting it." I've only heard it two or three times. And I'm sure that if they really looked at their family, there's somebody someplace. It's just such a common thing.

CT: Does it tend to be about college age when people go out and lose their faith? You put the emphasis on young people.

MaryAnn: Young adults. I



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When MaryAnn Gardner encountered this image of the painting "Our Lady of Sorrows" by California artist Jay Crisafulli on the Internet, she knew she had found a source of spiritual guidance who understood her heartache. In her talk, she said that by reflecting on Our Lady's life and praying to her, she was led to "trust in God's promises" and "began to sense that she was part of something much bigger than her little problem."

don't think high school so much, because mom and dad are still making you go to church there, and you're still pretty much believing what they say. It's when you get out in the world, lots of times college, sometimes older. Our son was 27 years old.

CT: Is it university life that tends to do it, or cultural influences?

MaryAnn: It's the society. I'm sure university life influences some. But it's not only college kids that leave the Church. It's hard to find a common denominator, other than somebody you love has left the Church.

I really think with people praying, it will turn it around. I tell these mothers their kids have the best thing going for them, and they don't even know it. And that's their mom praying.

CT: Why moms instead of dads?

MaryAnn: Probably because moms get more emotional about it. My husband was about as deep into this as me. And a lot of the reason I say "moms" is because I'm talking as a mother. There's a lot of very holy men.

When I spoke at a Serra Club, it was all men. And a little grandfather came up – he was a little, short, bald-headed guy, and in this room full of men, he came up afterwards and he said, "I have 21 grandchildren" and he burst into tears, "and none of them are in church."

Think of how painful that has to be for a man to make him cry

in front of a room full of men. You know he didn't want to do that. Now that's how deep that pain goes. I'm not so sure that those who are not parents – and by that I mean the clergy, possibly – that they understand how deep the pain is. They know it's there, but I don't think they understand maybe how much it really hurts, especially for parents who think they have done what was the right thing. You have your kids pray the rosary and you have them in Catholic schools. And your kitchen-table theology is really important. It was certainly practiced in my home.

CT: You say a couple of surprising things. One is that you have to learn to be silent, when the overwhelming urge is to try to talk your kids out of it.

MaryAnn: It was our overwhelming urge, too. But have you ever seen a young adult? They can take care of themselves. We're not responsible for their lives anymore. Why do they have to answer to us? They go out and do what they want to do. So you preach at them, or you argue with them, and what are they going to do? Just walk away. We forget that our children are grown-ups.

But in the same sense, we forget that faith is still a gift. We can't force anyone to believe. And I think that's a key thing. There isn't anything we can say to them that's going to make a difference.

The one thing we can do is pray. I think the fact that I say "stop preaching and arguing and nagging" is what shocks. It's not the mothers, because we kind of figure that out. But it's the fathers, because after all, dad's been the authority in the house. What he says goes. And the kids always listen to him. And they don't have to anymore.

CT: The next surprising thing: "Expect intervention, just expect it." That's pretty bold.

MaryAnn: But that's what He tells us (in Scripture). I know that's a bold statement, but we see it happen over and over. I still stand in awe if I get a prayer answered, because I think, God bothered with me.

That's really a difficult concept, when you have how many people in the world? He's got to be busy doing other things. But you get a prayer answered. And that part of it is very awesome.

CT: Why don't people believe in the power of prayer?

MaryAnn: Well, that's a good question, isn't it? Because Scripture tells us, it's there. Our priests tell us all the time.

CT: Why do you emphasize forgiveness so much in your talk?

MaryAnn: Because I think until we forgive other people – we have to have forgiveness in our heart. We're asking the Lord, do to me what I do to other people. As I said, unforgiveness eats away at you.

CT: So this is a function of making progress in the spiritual life.

MaryAnn: Absolutely. It was for Bob and me anyway. We really had to deal with whom we were going to forgive, and the fact that we needed to do it. And things changed when we did that.

CT: So your message really is, other than to help people to bring back their prodigals, to have confidence in the power of prayer.

MaryAnn: And it isn't even to bring them back. My message is how to live with it, and what you can do about it, instead of being in despair – to have some hope – but first of all, to live in peace without anxiety. That's really what we intend to do as our main priority: to reach out to those people who are hurting, because there's no need for us to sit around and cry and wring our hands.

We are chosen people. We can do this. We just forget who we are; we forget that we're Sons of God, and certainly a Church that has power because of the Lord. And we need to tap into that, instead of doing nothing.

CT: But your message is also one of hope.

MaryAnn: Absolutely. And that is what the brochure of Father Groeschel is about when it discusses the people who died in the 9-11 tragedy. His message is, we don't know how infinite the Lord's mercy is. He says within that billionth of a billionth of a second between life and death, we don't know what they chose. And I think that's what we pray for.

Editor's note: The Marian Mantle Group is a Kansas non-profit organization. In addition to an active on-line prayer group, the organization offers books, tapes, prayer cards and other resources for people with prodigal loved-ones at www.marianmantle.com.