

Groups offer a community of hope

■ PRAYER GROUPS FORMING ACROSS THE U.S. TO PRAY FOR FALLEN-AWAY CATHOLICS

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KANSAS CITY, Kan. —In the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus tells the story of the young man who asks his father for an advance on his inheritance. Subsequently, the son spends the inheritance on prodigal living, before repenting and returning home to his father — who greets him with open arms.

Like the father in the parable, many Catholics are forced to stand by and watch their loved ones make devastating choices — in some cases, turning their back on their Catholic faith.

While the faithful might feel, in cases, that all is lost, they must remember the parable's testament of hope and ultimate joy for the prayerful. It is that hope the Marian Mantle Group of Overland Park has been working to spread since 2003, to those struggling with a prodigal loved one.

“Our motto is: ‘It’s not hopeless, and we’re not helpless,’” said Mary Ann Gardner, founder of the Marian Mantle Group. “It’s not hopeless, because with God anything is possible. And it’s not helpless, because even if our family member or friend resists, we can still touch them with our prayers.”

In the 10 years since its inception, Marian Mantle prayer groups have spread to Catholic parishes nationwide, and even abroad.

Groups of parents, grandparents, friends and family typically meet weekly or biweekly to pray and to visit with and encourage one another.

“You have not failed as a parent or grandparent with a prodigal, and you are not alone,” said Gardner. “When Catholics join forces in intercessory prayer, God is at work. If one set of parents’ prayers are effective, then two sets are going to make all the more difference.”

Gardner wrote the group’s prayer books — “Rosary Novena to our Lady of Sorrows” and “Parent’s Way of the Cross” — while she was praying for her own son’s return to the faith.



LEAVEN PHOTO BY TODD HABIGER

Mary Ann Gardner is the founder of the Marian Mantle Group, a prayer and support ministry for those struggling with a loved one who has left the Catholic faith. In the 10 years since its inception, Marian Mantle prayer groups have spread to Catholic parishes nationwide, and even abroad.

“I wrote the books for myself at first, when I was really hurting,” said Gardner. “So they truly come from the heart, and I think parents and grandparents with prodigal children can really relate. Our prayers for our son were answered, and we want to help others find the same peace in Jesus through the storm.”

The groups pray that their children, friends or family will recognize the truth and beauty of the Catholic faith, and discourage members from criticizing or writing off their loved ones.

“You can’t fix or change someone else’s heart, but you can pray,” Gardner said. “Instead of criticizing and condemning, we encourage Catholics to focus on the Lord and to be accepting of his will. Then their prodigals can see more clearly the love in Catholicism.”

Gardner gives one example of the power of faithful prayer through the rosary novena to Our Lady of Sorrows. A Topeka mother, Rita, had been praying the rosary novena for her son who had abandoned the faith.

“Rita tells us her daughter and

grandchild were murdered one Sunday morning before Mass,” Gardner said. “Rita’s oldest son blamed God, rejected the faith, and left college. She did not hear from him for three years, going so far as hiring a private detective to find him.”

The private detective didn’t locate Rita’s son, and she began to think her child was lost to the family completely — until she was praying the rosary novena right before Christmas and received a call from her son.

“He told Rita he had stood in front of a Catholic church for a long time before deciding to go in,” said Gardner. “Once he sat in a pew, he had a strong urge to call his mother. Three days later, he called home to Rita’s joyous greeting and was home for Christmas. He was shocked his family wanted to hear from him, but has begun to trust God more and more.”

The loving intercessory prayer of family and friends can move mountains, but Gardner warns that it is not an easy fight.

“We tell people to prepare for battle, but to expect God’s intervention be-

cause of his promises to the faithful,” said Gardner. “It is hard, and it is evil that is tearing families apart today. But Catholics have a variety of weapons to work against evil. Ultimately, however, only God can call our lost sons and daughters back.”

The Marian Mantle Group has distributed over 5,000 copies of the rosary novenas, and recently had it translated into Spanish.

The group exists solely through the work of volunteers, and is always accepting of volunteers and speakers to help propel the ministry.

Prayer cards and booklets in both English and Spanish, CDs and DVDs of Gardner’s talks, and Gardner’s book of meditations on the mysteries of the rosary are available on the Marian Mantle website at: www.marianmantle.com. The website also serves as an online support community.

Parishioners may also request prayer booklets and information on starting a Marian Mantle Group by sending an email to: pray@marianmantle.com or by calling (913) 526-8977.