

Faith blossoms from tragedy

José Melo, 55, had a lukewarm journey of faith since he left the Dominican Republic 34 years ago for the United States. On a cold January night in West Baltimore three years ago, his belief in God and the church was scrambled, and nearly erased for good.

“Jan. 9, 2014, was the day my life changed forever,” Melo said, his voice trembling.

On that Thursday afternoon, Melo; his wife, Yrkania; and José Antonio Abreu, his brother-in-law, were working at the small grocery store the Melos established after moving to Baltimore from New York in 2005.

José Melo had left the store that day through the back door when he heard what he thought were water balloons bursting. Realizing they were gun shots, he rushed back inside.

“When I got there, I saw a man waving a gun in the air,” Melo recalled. “He saw me come in, pointed the gun at my brother-in-law and shot him straight through his heart.”

Seconds later, Melo’s wife also laid on the floor, shot point-blank four times in the neck and shoulder. She was alive, but seriously wounded.

“I was mad,” Melo said, crying. “I was angry at God because he had allowed my brother-in-law to die and my wife to be so ill. I felt empty, enraged and wanted to take revenge.”

Melo and his family sought the counsel of a Spanish-speaking priest, Redemptorist Father Robert Wojtek, then the pastor of Sacred Heart of Jesus-*Sagrado Corazón* de Jesús in Highlandtown.

“Talking to him was crucial for rebuilding my faith,” said Melo, who admitted that when he was living in New York, he only sparingly attended Mass and was not fully engaged in his faith.

“I listened to (Father Wojtek’s) advice,” Melo said, “prayed with him and talked

about God for months. I felt something was changing.”

Melo, who worshipped and participated in Hispanic ministry events at Our Lady of Pompei in East Baltimore when he first came to Baltimore, took faith formation classes at Sacred Heart, attended retreats and participated in worship.

Father Wojtek recalled meeting Melo for the first time shortly after the Melo family arrived in Baltimore.

“I looked at him and saw a genuine person – just a good person,” Father Wojtek said. “On Sundays, I would look through the pews and know I would find him seated at the same spot, like every Sunday.”

Melo was welcomed fully into the Catholic Church at the April 15 Easter Vigil Mass at Sacred Heart, receiving the sacraments of baptism, holy Communion and confirmation from Redemptorist Father Bruce Lewandowski, the pastor. He was among more than 630 catechumens (those who have not been baptized) and candidates (those baptized in another Christian faith, but who have not received Communion and/or confirmation) welcomed into the church at Easter Vigil Masses across the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

While Melo believes he had been baptized in the Dominican Republic, he was baptized again because there was no record of his having received the sacrament.

Father Wojtek, now associate pastor of St. Mary in Annapolis, is amazed at Melo’s transformation and feels proud to have witnessed part of his journey back to the faith.

“He is a true example of a heart touched by God’s grace,” Father Wojtek said. “The Lord touched his heart, awoke his faith and he responded so generously.”

Melo is now an active parishioner of Sacred Heart.

“After the violence I witnessed, I realize only God is the truth,” he said. “You just have to let yourself go and let God in.”