

‘God is here to grieve with us,’ says priest aiding grieving families in Orlando

By Jean Gonzalez

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ORLANDO, Fla. – Father Jorge Torres admits he has shed a lot of tears since June 12.

The same is true for Father Miguel Gonzalez, who along with Father Torres, other Orlando area priests, representatives of Catholic Charities and religious leaders of other faith communities spent hours counseling some of the 49 families who lost a loved one during the nation’s worst mass shooting that occurred during Latin night at Pulse nightclub.

“It all feels so surreal,” Father Torres said during a break from counseling. Fatigue evident in his voice, Father Torres, who serves as diocesan vocations director in Orlando, couldn’t readily answer how many families he had met with following the tragedy – perhaps 15, 20 or more.

Sometimes he would spend hours with a family. Other times he would stop and speak to people in the parking lot of a senior center designated as a safe haven for families as they awaited news of their children, spouses, friends and parents.

Families waited hours to receive word about whether their loved one was among those killed or injured after a lone gunman, identified as 29-year-old Omar Mir Seddique Mateen, opened fire inside the gay nightclub in the early morning hours of June 12. The shooter died in a gun battle with SWAT team members. Besides the 49 patrons who were killed, another 53 were wounded.

Over several days, Father Torres offered comfort as families sought news of their loved ones’ fates. He journeyed through stages of grief and preparing funeral arrangements. He shed tears as he witnessed their heartbreak. He said he felt comfortable embracing families and sharing his own sadness, because he saw it as an “encounter of God and faith.”

“When I would pray with families I would begin by saying, ‘Jesus, at the cross you cried out to the Father, “Why have you abandoned me?”’ By saying that, it gave them permission to express all the feelings they had, and we would not judge those feelings and we were going to love them,” he said of the understandable anger and confusion of the reality of losing their loved one in such a violent, senseless way.

“(The families) should know that in their heart those emotions do not separate them from God, but bring us closer together. It is part of our humanity.”

But there was a time things became so real and so overwhelming, even under the intense media presence, Father Torres tried to turn away and have a moment to cry alone. Those honest, raw moments have led Father Torres to reflect on what might be the next step for the community.

“This is going to lead us to an examination of conscience. As a society how do we help anyone suffering and find a path to prevent this from happening again? Because my biggest concern is when this event is in the rearview mirror, another might occur,” Father Torres told the Florida Catholic, newspaper of the Orlando Diocese. “And for right now, we as a church should examine how we reach out to everyone affected by this tragedy and let them know they are loved and they are always welcome, regardless of their perception of the church.”

Many of the victims’ families are Hispanic, and having Spanish-speaking counselors available proved crucial. Catholic Charities representatives, deacons and priests, including Father Torres and Father Gonzalez, provided such help. Father Gonzalez said it was a blessing to be able to communicate with family members in their native language. It offered another layer of comfort for them.

Counseling was not a foreign activity for either priest, but the magnitude of the grief and tragedy was.

Father Gonzalez recalled the personal witness offered during the priest convocation held nine months ago when Bishop John G. Noonan of Orlando invited Msgr. Robert Weiss, pastor of St. Rose of Lima Parish in Newtown, Connecticut, to speak. In December 2012, a mass shooting at Newtown’s Sandy Hook Elementary School took the lives of 20 children and six adults.

“Thinking now, his presence was a blessing,” Father Gonzalez said. “Everything he spoke about, the emotion, the chaos, but also the outpouring of the support from people in the community, is real. There are also the little things he spoke about that bring up the memories of the event, little things like the sirens, ambulances and helicopters. And it’s true. I hear it from my parishioners who live nearby Pulse. All those sights and sounds relive the tragedy and remind us it is not over.”

With the deceased identified, the next step has been to make final arrangements. Father Gonzalez is pastor of St. John Vianney Parish, which is less than two miles from Pulse nightclub. While no funerals have been planned at his parish, pastors of other area Orlando parishes and even south in Davenport have contacted families who lost loved ones. One parish – Holy Cross in south Orlando – will celebrate four funerals for the fallen.

Like Father Torres, Father Gonzalez knew it was imperative that families felt free to express all their feelings. Yes, they could express their anger with God. Yes, they

could say they were angry at the world. Ultimately dealing with those raw feelings could inspire healing, even when it is a long, arduous journey.

"I don't know their pain and I don't dare to say I understand, but I shared the pain I felt when I was a teen and my uncle was assassinated - a victim of a robbery who was stabbed by a young man," Father Gonzalez said. "It is amazing when I shared that, all that anger ceased and that person recognized where I was at."

It was then the priest could try to convey that it is possible to still love God, recognize God's existence and yet be confused about what happened and why.

"I imagine God, who is real, also weeps for us. That's why he gave us his Son; to wipe our tears and say, 'I know your pain and I shower you with mercy,'" Father Gonzalez said. "This (tragedy) is not God's plan, but God is here to grieve with us."

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