

Pastor says ‘words are not enough’

BLACKSBURG, Va. - Words are not enough to comfort grieving parents, said a priest who spent time with the parents of several of the slain Virginia Tech students when they first learned their son or daughter was dead.

In the early hours after the murder rampage on campus that left 33 dead, Father James Arsenault, pastor of St. Mary Parish in Blacksburg, was at Montgomery Regional Hospital with those who were wounded and their families.

Then he went to the Inn at Virginia Tech, a hotel on campus where parents seeking information about their children were asked to gather. He said he left the parish at 8:30 that morning and did not get back until 1:30 the following morning.

In a brief interview in his rectory late April 18 - after three full days of seeing to the pastoral care of victims, families and students - Father Arsenault said that approaching parents who had just heard their child was dead, he would simply say something like, “Words are not enough to express how sad we are. I’m so sorry! I’m so sorry!” and then try to wrap them in a big hug.

When he hugged them, they would break down and cry, he told Catholic News Service.

After staying with them a while, he would pray the Our Father and Hail Mary with them and lead them in prayers for the dead, he said.

Mia Ortega, a 26-year-old graduate student who also works for the university in student affairs, said in a phone interview April 19 with CNS that she was receiving “a lot of support from my family and my friends” to help her cope with the tragedy. She said she has had messages of prayers and support from all over, including from

friends she worked with last summer as a Jesuit volunteer in Dublin, Ireland.

In an e-mail to friends early April 18, Ortega wrote, "It is hard to believe that it has only been two days. The days are long here in Blacksburg.

"I am doing my best to get by. I slip from being numb to uncontrollable crying. Sometimes I forget about the whole thing, and sometimes reality slaps me hard in the face. ... In some ways, I am expecting to wake up. It is like walking through a lucid nightmare."

"It is also difficult to imagine the magnitude of the situation," she added. "People on the news have been calling this a massacre. Massacre at Virginia Tech. I even have trouble saying the word aloud."

She said Ryan "Stack" Clark, a resident assistant at West Ambler Johnston Hall who was killed there trying to come to the aid of the first student slain, was a friend of hers. "He was an incredible man, with a very big heart. ... I miss his jokes, his smile and his beautiful spirit," she wrote. "He died serving his community, doing what he loved best. I'm very proud of him, and I'm missing him."

By phone Ortega said she is still numb and has not been able to sleep more than two hours at a time since the tragedy.

She said that ever since she saw the images on TV that the killer, Cho Seung-Hui, had sent to NBC the morning of the killings, she has not been able to turn out the lights in her apartment. If a room goes dark, she said, she sees the vivid image shown on TV of Cho with both arms raised holding the guns he used in the slaughter. "I feel bombarded by that image."

"A lot of us here are struggling" to understand what has happened, she said, but those images have not helped.

"Before that, we were demanding answers," she said. "Now I know that any answer

we are going to get is not a good one.”

She said her friends and colleagues were also very disturbed by the release of Cho’s images and many of them have stopped going to the major news Web sites because they know they will have to see those images again.

To help people cope with the fear that the Virginia Tech tragedy may provoke, the U.S. branch of the Christian Family Movement, a network of parish- or neighborhood-based groups of families that meet to support one another in Christian living, has posted a “Living Without Fear” program on its Web site, <http://cfm.org>. (The “Living Without Fear” link takes visitors to a section called “Special Meetings”; the program is No. 8.)

The nine-page program, which can be downloaded, provides a structured guide for a group meeting to reflect on fear, how it arises and how it affects people, and to discuss ways to face it from a Christian perspective. It begins with Scripture readings and several statements by individuals or organizations, including the U.S. bishops and the Department of Homeland Security, about living with fear and overcoming it.

The guide for group discussion follows the “observe, judge, act” pattern that the Christian Family Movement uses as a way of moving from reflection and understanding to concrete actions dealing with an issue constructively in one’s own life.

Contributing to this story were Jerry Filteau in Washington and Paul Haring in Blacksburg.