

# Pilgrims with a purpose: Parents of 10 lend feet, voices - and experience - to March for Life

**By Paul McMullen**

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Paula Tiller was 13 in 1978 when she attended her first national March for Life. This was not a simple hour-long bus ride to Washington, D.C., but seven hours each way in a caravan from upstate New York.

She will return to the National Mall Jan. 22, with her current parish, St. Peter in Hancock, and attempt to connect there with the Christiana Homeschool Academy in Westminster, combining several of her favorite causes.

"Other than for a pregnancy, I've never missed one," Tiller said of the March.

That is not a perfect record of attendance, as Tiller and her husband, Paul, are the parents of 10, ages 10 to 31.

The narcissism of some peers manifested itself in the Me Generation; the Tillers, staunchly pro-life, nurture their own "We Generation."

"We wanted to be open to life, and open to God's will as a family," Paula said, when asked about the size of their brood. "If we accept the challenges He sent us, he would send us the means and patience and everything we need."

God indeed has provided to the Tiller family both the means and the patience - and the challenges.



*Left: the 10 Tiller children pause with their parents at their Clear Spring home on Thanksgiving Day in 2012; standing, from left, Edmund, James and Paul Jr.; seated, middle row, from left, Kateri, parents Paul and Paula, and Natalie; seated, front row, from left, Danielle, Bernadette, Philomena, Theresa and Elizabeth. Facing page, top: Edmund Tiller, 17, second from right, flanks Father John J. Lombardi as they near Philadelphia Sept. 26. He was one of five members of the Tiller family on the Feet for Francis pilgrimage. (Courtesy Tiller Family)*

## **High school sweethearts**

Paul Tiller is one of six, his wife one of eight. They were high school sweethearts in Verona, N.Y., 35 miles east of Syracuse. Paul wrestled and played trumpet in the marching band, and Paula played field hockey and the cello in the orchestra. They

also saw plenty of each other at Our Lady of Good Counsel Parish, where the mission statement includes the following:

“Our liturgical music is truly sacred music, drawn from the rich treasury of the Church’s heritage. ... We take our obligation seriously to defend the unborn, the dying and the sanctity of marriage.”

Until his retirement in 2010, Father Edmund J. Morelle was pastor of Our Lady of Good Counsel. The second Tiller son carries his name.

“He (Father Morelle) taught us our catechism,” Paula said. “He was instrumental in forming us in our faith.”

Paula gave birth to Danielle in 1984 – and then Kateri in 1985, Natalie in 1987, Elizabeth in 1989, Bernadette in 1992, Theresa in 1994, Paul Jr. in 1996, Edmund in 1998, and James in 2001. The two oldest were home-schooled until high school at Holy Cross Academy in Oneida, where Paula served as a board member.

She had talked her way into the parish choir before reaching the age minimum – then served as its volunteer director from age 19 to 38. Paula would probably still be in that role if Paul had not been downsized out of his job managing a printing company in Utica, in 2003.

“I was so angry, but you don’t see God’s plan,” Paula said.

Her parents had moved to Winchester, Va., and her mother prayed for them to do the same.

“You can get off your knees now, Mom,” Paula remembers saying. “She was excited, but I’m going to be a single parent with nine children.”

Paul prayed a novena to St. Philomena, and headed south for an interview on Wednesday of Holy Week. Paula prayed her own, which ended Easter Sunday. She had asked for clarity; the next morning came a job offer considerably warmer than any irons in the fire Paul had in New York.

It was far from the parish friends they had made, but in a region that had already exhibited its pull on them.

### **Right where they belong**

In 1994, on a visit to see Paula’s brother, Matthew, at Christendom College in Front Royal, Va., Paul pulled the family van stuffed with six Tiller girls off I-81 near Gettysburg.

“I like to drive (U.S.) 15, because of the orchards,” Paul said. “Then, we saw the sign for the grotto.”

Paula said they “just loved the solitude, the quiet” of the National Shrine Grotto of Lourdes in Emmitsburg, where they grew to admire the late Monsignor Hugh Phillips, who was president and a fixture at Mount St. Mary’s University and

Seminary before directing the grotto from 1958 until 2001.

On trips south to visit family, the Tillers kept going out of their way to visit it.

After Paul went to work for Hagerstown Book Binding and Printing, they bought a home on the other side of the Blue Ridge, in Smithsburg. Shortly thereafter came their youngest, who turned 10 Dec. 12. She was named Philomena - for the saint to whom Paul had offered his novena.

They moved farther west in Washington County to Clear Spring, where there are more Marian shrines - two - in the Tiller home than TV screens. In the backyard, everything is plural - two swing sets, two jungle gyms, two picnic tables.

Their yard backs up to a soybean field. Out front, across the road, are grazing cattle. The town has St. Michael, a mission of St. Mary in Hagerstown, but no youth group or choir, one reason the Tillers worship in Hancock, where they are active in both. Another is Father John J. "Jack" Lombardi, the pastor, who previously served as the chaplain for the grotto.

"As well as being a family rooted in the Catholic faith, the Tillers bring many gifts," Father Lombardi said. "They lead and sing in our main choir, play instruments, help in our youth group and social outreach, and make sick calls in hospitals and nursing homes."

It's a 16-mile drive from Clear Spring to St. Peter, and 70 miles to Christiana Homeschool Academy, which convenes two days a week. Paula teaches and the three youngest Tillers are students.

They were making that commute in October 2013, when a southbound car crossed the median on SR-27 in Carroll County, T-boned the Tillers' Mazda van on the driver's side and sent Paula to the Shock Trauma Center at the University of Maryland Maryland Center in Baltimore for three days with a near complete rupture of the spleen.

Ordered to "lay still" for eight weeks, she was teaching again in five.

"She is headstrong," Paul said.

### **Five for the road**

In addition to having one of the largest families in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the Tillers are also among its most active pilgrims.

Various family combinations joined Father Lombardi on Fortnight for Freedom 100-mile walks from Hancock to Baltimore and Washington, D.C., in 2012 and 2013, respectively. A year later, Paul Jr. traveled with him on a mission to Africa.

Most recently, five Tillers participated in the Feet for Francis/Pilgrimage of Love and Mercy in late September. Paula, Edmund and James walked from Baltimore to Philadelphia. Philomena was supposed to ride alongside her dad in a support vehicle, but logged many miles on foot.

Whether it was comforting an accident victim, kneeling outside a Planned

Parenthood clinic or at daily Mass, the Tiller parents' voices inspired others to raise theirs in song. During one homily, Father Lombardi asked Paul about their 2010 mission to Kolkata.

"Most beautiful place I've been on this earth," Paul said, of the giving he found among the Missionaries of Charity and other religious. "I yearn to go back."

The pilgrimage culminated in a gratifying view of Pope Francis. While seeing a pope was not new for Paula - she saw St. John Paul II at Yankee Stadium in 1979 and again in 2002 as a chaperone for World Youth Day in Toronto - this time was different.

The Tillers are happily private people, but on day five of the pilgrimage, Paula found herself sitting for an interview with a producer from the NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt.

"It's important to be proud of our faith, and to witness to the Gospel and not let the world silence us," she had said before the pilgrimage. "Romans 1:16-18 says, 'For I am not ashamed of the Gospel.' The world wants to silence us. It is important to stand up for our faith."

On Sept. 29, Paul and Paula welcomed another grandchild. They number six, including one born with spina bifida in 2013 who lived 22 minutes.

The Tillers will again march - and pray and sing - for life Jan. 22. They will share again of the year they momentarily lost little Paul Jr. in a crowd of what by now are familiar faces.

"We see all the people," Paul said, "we know from everywhere."

*Also see:*

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