

# **‘So many funerals,’ says El Paso priest who comforted grieving kin**

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Father Fabian Marquez was the right priest at a very wrong time.

He was among several priests in El Paso, Texas, summoned to help out where they could in the hours following the brazen Aug. 3 assault at a Walmart store in the Texas border town that left 22 dead and dozens of others wounded.

Father Marquez’s role was to go to an elementary school in the city that had been set up as a “reunification center” for the loved ones of those who might have been in harm’s way during the massacre.

And as for how many “hours following” the rampage? Father Marquez, by his own count, was there for 48 hours.

It fell upon him to console family after family when police told them that a spouse, child or parent was among the dead.

As a result, Father Marquez has celebrated many funeral Masses, even of Catholics who were not members of his church, El Buen Pastor (Good Shepherd) just outside El Paso in Sparks, Texas, where he has served as pastor for the past four years.

When reached by Catholic News Service Aug. 16, he was hours away from presiding at the funeral Mass of Andre Anchondo. He and his wife, Jordan, were killed — allegedly by Patrick Crucius, according to police — as they were shielding their infant son, Paul, just 2 months of age, from the hail of gunfire.

Asked what was going to make Andre Anchondo’s funeral different, Father Marquez replied: “The difference with this one is, after having so many already — I’ve been to so many funerals — we get to experience and share with the family the loss of a young man, a young man who showed us the greatest sacrifice, the greatest love. The message I sent yesterday (is) there is no greater love than to give your life for one’s friend — and that’s basically what he did. He protected his wife and his young

child.”

Yet there was one thing that links Anchondo’s funeral to those of the other victims. “The tragedy,” Father Marquez said. “It’s very tragic because anybody who died in this massacre in El Paso had to go this way.”

Beyond the circumstances of the married couple’s murder, the Anchondos received even more glare in the national spotlight when President Donald Trump, visiting El Paso the week following the massacre, smiled in photos with the baby and flashed an incongruous thumbs-up.

Anchondo’s family is “a family that’s grieving, that’s hurting. A loving family, a caring family,” the priest said. “When we’re with them and we see not only their pain and suffering for their son, but the family is so focusing on forgiveness, focusing on being better people, that the death of their son helps us to come together as a community, as a faith community, as a city and a nation, instead of promoting hate, but promoting more love.”

Father Marquez said he has been bearing up fairly well in the two weeks since the mass shooting.

“It’s been hard for all of us. Hard for all of us to see this tragedy come to our society. It really shook us. The shooter came to our city to divide. But we’re stronger than ever. We’ve united in prayer, united in faith. We are stronger. El Paso strong,” he told CNS.

“With Christ, everything has been stronger. It’s been long days. Ministering to people, journeying with people, praying with people, but very rewarding to see that in the midst of our tragedy, God is with us. It is truly a blessing to see that God is with us as we journey together in this tragedy.”

At Father Marquez’s parish, where he says it is “standing-room only” in the 325-capacity church for all four weekend Masses, “we were very vulnerable. We were not ready for something like this. We never felt it would happen in a community that is so welcoming, so loving, so caring, so willing to give their best to anyone who comes to our city, who lives in our city. We are always a community that welcomes

the stranger,” he said.

Parishioners at the overwhelmingly Hispanic parish had grown more wary of stricter immigration policy and enforcement over the past two years.

“My community, we’re all concerned. Everybody’s concerned about what’s been happening. It couldn’t have happened at a worse time — Mexican people being targeted by a shooter in our community to take the lives of our loved ones,” Father Marquez said. “It creates more fear, it creates more anxiety, and (those are) the feelings my parish community is experiencing.”

Regardless of the fears and anxieties affecting its members, he loves his parish.

“My parish is a beautiful, vibrant community that is willing to sacrifice its own needs for others. We do live the Gospel to serve God, to serve others, to give the best that we can for our community, not just for us but the entire city of El Paso,” Father Marquez said.

“We go out in search of that wounded sheep and they care for them, they nurture it and they celebrate. They also believe that when we help the poor and help the sick, we help Jesus,” he added. “We try to be a good example of that to others.”

Father Marquez said he received many supportive messages from parishioners for his role in counseling grieving kin, but said he thought to himself, “I’m only doing my job. I’m only doing what a priest needs to do.”

That job has not ended. Before the day would turn to night, Father Marquez was headed to the wake service of another massacre victim, 63-year-old Marge Reckard, before a funeral the following day.

“That one is also very special, because this is a couple. The husband, Tony, has no family. They both have no family in El Paso. Our family is going to be with him. The funeral has been opened to the community to join them, to share with them,” Father Marquez said.

“We’re going to go as a church, we’re going to be there with him and pray with him, and for his wife. The venue has changed. It was going to be at a very small funeral

home, it's been moved to a much bigger funeral home so the people of El Paso can be with him."

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