

# The Paschal Mystery

Why Catholic?

Journey Through the Catechism

Letter from Dr. Ronald J. Valenti, executive director of Catholic Education Ministries

Her name was Jeanne Stewart. Her walk was different from the other kids. She threw her left leg out and her right hip seem to rise behind her as she labored with every step she took. The left leg was thinner than her right, and her exaggerated limp made walking a struggle. It was 1950, I was 7 years old and polio was the horrific disease of children that either killed you or left you maimed for life.

Jeanne was one of polio's victims. From the eyes of a 7-year-old boy, she was a very pretty 15 year old who somehow society classified as being different. She was one of those medical statistics who lived on my street of row houses in South Philadelphia. She was subjected to debilitating stares because she was crippled. She was a victim who other children did not know how to handle; they either avoided her, or sometimes even cruelly made fun of her. Seeing and experiencing Jeanne's physical malady made those around her uncomfortable.

I was fortunate to have parents who gave me a perspective of what lens to look through when I saw people. It was a lens of seeing God's beauty and mystery in what others saw as imperfection. My mom and dad taught me to recognize and appreciate Jeanne's captivating smile, her bubbling personality, her beautiful outlook on life and her cheerfulness. More importantly, I was introduced to her deep sense of faith. She had such a love of the Lord. It was manifested in small ways, but the one that resonates the most was Jeanne's love for the Eucharist. She truly got excited about receiving Communion. It seemed that her life was enriched and fulfilled by the reception of the Blessed Sacrament. And what I remember the most was Jeanne's six-block trip walking to church to attend Mass. It was an ordinary exercise for most, but a real challenge for Jeanne.

It wasn't until years later that I understood fully and deeply the theological impact of Jeanne Stewart's witness to me. Jeanne lived the passion of Christ. Her daily

suffering and pain, which she bore without complaint or rancor, was a mirror image of her surrender to Christ. All that I ever heard either in religion class or in sermons about the paschal mystery did not make its full impression upon me until I put Jeanne in the equation. Jeanne lived the mystery. Jeanne's constant dealing not only with the physical trauma, but at times the feeling of isolation, was just hints of her identifying with Christ's passion.

Then it became most apparent. At the heart of Christian life is the paschal mystery - the once and for all saving event of Christ's death and resurrection that continues to be present to all of human history and something that continues to be manifested in every age and in every era. Christians find new meaning for life when we recognize that our own daily dying and risings are a share in God's saving activity for the world. This is what it means to be Christ's body, member for member; our times of suffering, joys, trials and tribulations are part of the work of the cross and the wonder of the resurrection - all continuing Christ's work of salvation of the world. Jeanne was the embodiment of that revelation; she gave purpose and meaning to the mystery.

Her name was Jeanne Stewart - a girl with a limp, a girl who bore the wounds of polio - but one who is remembered and celebrated as a living example of the work Christ began in his ministry and continues in the work of us, the church.

The second topic for the six-week spring session of Why Catholic? is "The Paschal Mystery." Next week, Therese Wilson Favors, director of the archdiocesan Office of African American Ministries, will write about the third topic, "The Holy Spirit and the Church."