

# Vocation of witness

On Aug. 12, Father Matthew Buening, pastor of St. Paul Church in historic Ellicott City, celebrated a funeral mass for a good man named Donald, who died at the age of 61, while recovering from surgery for prostate cancer.

Strong and energetic, Don brandished a full shock of salt-and-pepper hair, a hearty Irish smile, and a warm embrace of basic, no-nonsense decency that made everyone he met feel they mattered. He was a solid man's-man, who liked sports; loved his wife of 37 years, Anne; beamed with pride over his two grown sons and two granddaughters; and prayed to God like he meant it.

Don's death rocked his family and friends, because everyone thought he was on the mend. He died on his couch on Aug. 7, while resting and watching some TV. Don was gone too young and too soon—and during the homily, Father Matt helped the congregation sense the goodness of the man: the depth of Donald's compassion, humanity, and faith in God and the Church.

At the end of the service, Monsignor Joseph Luca, pastor of St. Louis Church in Clarksville, came to the lectern and shared his own warm-hearted tribute to Don. Then, Monsignor Luca turned to Father Matt and praised his celebration of the Mass: "You are awesome!"

The church—filled with Don's family, friends, and several dozen clergy and religious: deacons, priests, nuns, bishops, and the Archbishop of Baltimore—erupted in applause. The moment was powerful, because, as everyone in the pews knew, Father Matt was about to offer the final blessing for his very own father, Donald Paul Buening.

Awesome? Yes, but even more precisely, heroic. Father Matt's spiritual witness—likely nurtured since conception by his mother and father—had come full circle. As celebrant, Father Matt delivered a joyful oration, part selfless hymn, part tour-de-force of prayer. But, most profoundly, the young priest painted a heartbreaking personal mosaic: Pain and admiration for a man loved and lost as father and best friend; hope for a soul enveloped in Christ's promise of eternal life.

How did Father Matt share such a supernatural gift of witness in an hour of remarkable grief? How did this gentle son celebrate his father's passing with such clarity and emotional strength? What guided the trajectory of Father Matt's life toward this day and a vocation of service and grace? Donald and Anne Buening know the answers and shared them through Don's passing. Similarly, Robert and Sharon Marie Bialek witnessed a harvest of grace in the priesthood of their only son Father Mark Bialek, pastor of Resurrection of our Lord Church in Laurel, who courageously laid to rest his mother in May.

The Catholic Church is struggling, like most of society, to build a new cadre of leaders, like Father Matt and Father Mark, strong enough—emotionally and spiritually—to navigate through the headwinds of moral relativism and social malaise. Instant connectivity through social media makes it easy to gravitate toward an end game of fleeting material gain and stature. But how do we seek and nurture the promise of genuine greatness in the leaders we truly need ... those who one day will baptize us, brings us to God through the Eucharist, marry us, reconcile our sins, anoint us when we're sick or lay our souls to rest?

Legend has it St. Francis of Assisi once admonished, "Preach the Gospel always; if necessary, use words."

In the priesthood of their son Matthew, Don and Anne Buening showed us, quietly, how to build a vocation through pure witness, centered on familial love, respect for others, and devotion to God. Prayer moves us closer to God; but God may be more inclined to help if we stand up, reset our priorities, and close the gap between what we say we need from our faith and what we do to build up the Church. What better way to start than by embracing and supporting parents—the foot soldiers in the fray, the workers in the vineyard, the farmers in the Lord's field—who take on the responsibility for growing the next harvest of priests and religious to serve the Church...and to bless us on the long road home.

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