

When grief is the guest at Christmas

When Gina Marini and her family gather for Christmas dinner, they'll continue the tradition they started more than two decades ago – leaving an empty chair for the family patriarch, Giuseppe Arlia.

“This is a trying time for us,” said Gina Marini, whose father died around Christmas.

“This was 20 years ago, but Christmas time is always more difficult for us. But he loved Christmas and we keep his tradition of trying to keep strong and keep going. He's always in our hearts.”

Marini also continues another tradition: attending the annual Advent Mass at Holy Cross Mausoleum, where her father is interred. Mass is celebrated there every third Saturday of the month.



Rita Summers

On Dec. 16 it was standing-room only. Families came together in grief and in hope, to remember loved ones who have died. Many pinned photo ornaments of their loved ones onto a Christmas tree.

“It's a hard time,” said Rita Summers, her voice cracking as she remembered her mother, Grazia Bennardo, who just died two years ago. For Summers, the pain is still fresh.

She says attending the Advent Mass helps.

“It brings my mom closer to me. It’s Christmas. It’s that time of year where I want to be celebrating with her too. She’s always in your heart, but I feel closer to her when I’m here.”

For many, the holidays, Christmas in particular, can be a difficult time, especially when grief in its many forms – including death, job loss, illness, addiction, the end of a relationship – is juxtaposed against it.

Ben Bentum sees it often in his practice as a counsellor with Mercy Counselling, a ministry of Catholic Social Services in Edmonton.

“I think the holidays are particularly tricky because it’s supposed to be such a joyous time and because it’s a family time when people are together,” he said.

“If you’ve lost somebody, if someone has died, then that relationship is no longer there. The holidays just highlight that relationship, the emptiness of it, the missing piece.”



Ben Bentum of Mercy Counselling in Edmonton

It may sound counterintuitive, but Bentum advises making intentional time to face the pain and grief.

He suggests having a ritual, such as lighting candles or leaving an empty chair, as well as having an exit strategy – for example, if a Christmas party or family event becomes too overwhelming.

“A lot of time we’re afraid of the sadness, but we don’t know anybody that doesn’t stop crying, so eventually the tears end. It’s really the heightened

emotion that make it difficult to manage.”

“Dealing with grief such as a death or traumatic event is as unique as each family and each individual,” Bentum said.

That includes children, who should also be given the latitude to grieve as well.

“We want to protect our kids, but they are grieving too. We can invite them to grieve in child-appropriate levels,” such as leaving an empty chair for a grandparent.

“What we know about grief is that there are no set timelines for anyone,” Bentum said.

“Does it get easier? It becomes more familiar as time goes on. We re-learn how to live in the world again. Allow the process to happen, as it happens.”

It’s finding the balance between grief and hope for the future that is essential as the family readjusts to life without that loved one, that job, or that relationship.

Bentum noted individuals may find counselling, as well as support groups in churches and online, and events like the monthly Mass at Holy Cross Mausoleum are available to help family members through the grieving process and to find hope.

For Concetta Sirica, her family’s faith plays a large role in finding that hope.

They attend the monthly Mass at Holy Cross Mausoleum and she takes time to pause in the corner of her home where her family has placed framed photos of her parents Antonio and Veneranda Sirica, and the dried flowers from their funerals.

“Looking at it every day brings them so much closer to me,” said Sirica. “It brings me happiness because it’s like they’re still there. We try to be hopeful because being sad isn’t really going to help us. Being hopeful, we’re remembering them every day. It gets a little bit easier as time goes on, but you never forget and that’s why we’re here.”

At the Advent Mass, Archbishop Richard Smith noted that the Catholic families in attendance share both loss and faith. In his homily, Archbishop Smith drew a parallel between their grief and St. John the Baptist’s time living in the wilderness – but also the hope of Christmas.

“Internally, at the level of the soul, there is probably no wilderness as vast as grief,” Smith said.

“In the birth of the Saviour what is communicated to us, with great clarity, is

God's love for his people, God's desire to draw near to his people especially when they are experiencing that moment of desert we call loss and we call grief."

It is through their faith that Concetta Sirica and her sister Gianna Trulli have found a way to accept the loss of their parents and to find hope.

"If you have a family you can't dwell on the sadness," Trulli said.

"You have to carry on because you've got to bring the family forward.

That hope, the birth of Christ, that's what started everything for us."