

Fourth Sunday of Advent reflection by Connecticut Chaplain
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I am writing this reflection for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, when we will hear once again that Jesus will be called “Emmanuel, God with Us,” on the tenth anniversary of the shootings at Sandy Hook School in Newtown. This morning, I opened the rectory’s daily papers to see in the headline of the Greenwich Time, “Sandy Hook, 10 years later, ‘a sacred sorrow..’”

A “sacred sorrow,” my eyes became fixed upon those words and the pictures beneath of all the children and staff who lost their lives on that day. A “Sacred Sorrow,” those are beautiful words to describe a tragedy beyond belief. A tragedy that, not too long ago, would have been considered unimaginable.

It is the mother of a first grader who died that day, Jenny Hubbard, who refers to the Sandy Hook tragedy as a “Sacred Sorrow.” She was among the families who lost loved ones who recently gathered to dedicate the new Sandy Hook School Memorial. She was quoted in the Greenwich Time as saying, “While I miss Catherine...I have seen the best in humanity, and I am incredibly grateful to be where I am.” In reference to the relationship that the grieving families all share Jenny believes that: “It is sacred what we share, and I am honored to be among those families. There is no other way to say it – it is a sacred sorrow we will forever share.”

I felt tears welling up. Wow, what incredibly redemptive words in response to a horrific event. From the perspective of the Judeo-Christian tradition, Jenny was expressing something much deeper than the “power of positive thinking,” or “channeling negative energy into positive energy,” she, in my view, was expressing the transformative nature of true redemption - when we can see beyond our pain and loss to the healing love of the divine and allow God to “rename” (redeem) the seemingly senseless pain as something sacred, holy, not worthless. Without exaggeration, Jenny’s words have changed me. They changed the way I perceive not only the horrible

tragedy of Sandy Hook but also the far less tragic events of my own life. That is also why I call them redemptive, her words have changed me for the better

It is in like manner that a crucified Lord, born in a stable, could even remotely be seen as “Emmanuel, God with Us.” From the very beginning, his life was anything but idyllic. We hear of it in the Gospel for today. Joseph, upon hearing that Mary was pregnant had decided to “divorce her quietly.” Why “quietly?” If he gave the real reason for the divorce (divorce of the betrothal) namely, her pregnancy outside of marriage, she would have been stoned to death in punishment. He loved her too much for that to happen, and his heart must have broken into pieces – he experienced the beginnings of “a sacred sorrow.” The angel then shares the fullness of the redemptive plan: “Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her.” God had a plan, a sacred plan. In the midst of confusion uncertainty, and pain, God was going to draw the world more closely to himself.

Our lives can be wonderful at times, and then in the blinking of an eye, can become anything but idyllic. We can feel lost, and confused. Our only true call as Christians and as members of the Order of Malta is to permit God to turn our pain into a “sacred sorrow.” We are redeemed by a savior who was misunderstood from the very beginning by parents whose hearts had been broken, and because of this (not in spite of this) he is our Redeemer, “Emmanuel, God With Us.” We are redeemed through a “sacred sorrow.”