

## Has Someone You Love Left the Church?

By Carole O'Hara and Barbara Sanborn.

When Mary Ann Gardner's son left the church, she reacted as most Catholic mothers would. She lost sleep, shed tears, wondered what she had done wrong, and questioned how it could have happened. Still, she had to face reality. Her son who had prayed the rosary and faithfully attended Mass, and who had attended Catholic college, no longer went to Mass or received the Sacraments.

As Gardner and her husband searched for answers, they attended conferences and retreats in the hope they might find a way to bring their son back to the Faith. They met many others who were hurting because a loved one had left the Church.

"I just couldn't forget the pain I saw in so many eyes," Gardner says. She began to suspect that God and Our Lady were nudging her to share her story with others who were hurting.

"I didn't easily agree to this, Gardner said. "It was difficult to decide to speak publicly about such a private topic." One day, at a Marian conference, she realized

she could no longer deny that she was to reach out to others who were hurting, too.

For the past two years she has shared her story at parishes and conferences in Kansas and surrounding States. Through a joint effort by members of Hutchinson's Tri-Parish Catholic Community, she will speak at Holy Cross Church in Hutchinson on September 25, 2005, from 2-4P.M. All are invited to attend.

Gardner describes the presentation as a non-judgmental attempt to offer hope, help, and a plan of positive action. Since this topic is so personal, and painful for many, she assures us that no one will be asked to do any group sharing. However, Gardner and her husband will be available during breaks and after the presentation to visit one-on-one with anyone who wishes. They promise to remain until everyone who wants to talk with them has had the opportunity."

Gardner also helps people organize "Silent Strength" prayer groups to pray for the return of prodigal Catholics. It is all part of the Marian Mantle Group she formed three years ago. They are a group of Catholics dedicated

to reaching out to all who share the heartache of a loved one who is no longer a practicing Catholic. This effort includes an online prayer group at [www.MarianMantle.com](http://www.MarianMantle.com) where members from Kansas, and more than a dozen other States, join with Catholics as far away as Australia and Singapore to pray for lapsed Catholics.

Gardner authored the Prayers for Prodigal Series including a Way of the Cross, a Rosary Novena to Our Lady of Sorrows, and a Parents Litany. Each was written to pray for the return of our loved ones to the practice of the Catholic faith and carries the imprimatur of Archbishop James P. Keleher of the Kansas City Kansas Archdiocese. Her latest work is Through Her Eyes, a series of meditations on each of the mysteries of the rosary as seen through the eyes of Our Lady.

Our Diocese of Wichita has made an imprint on Gardner's work and on her heart. She treasures the letter she received from Bishop Olmsted in 2003 in which he encouraged her to move forward with this effort. In July, Seminarian Ruben Ortiz who resides at Our Lady of Guadalupe

Church this summer, translated into Spanish her "Prayer to Our Lady of Sorrows for the Return of Prodigal Catholics".

"I'm grateful to have been invited to speak in Hutchinson, so that I might repay in some small way the kindness I have received," Gardner said.

The purpose of it all is to help bring peace to those who hurt and help them to try to make a way for their loved ones to return to the sacraments. Those who hear Gardner's story say it does give them peace, and hope, too. That prodigal son whose leaving broke his mother's heart a few years ago, did return to the Church. Today he is a strong, active Catholic

"It's time to stop listening to those who tell us it's hopeless and we are helpless," Gardner said, "it's time start listening to God."

To register for this event at Holy Cross Church in Hutchinson, call Barbara Sanborn at 620-662-0697. Registration is requested, but not required. For more information about the Marian Mantle Group, or to schedule a presentation for your organization, call 913-526-8977 or email [maryann@marianmantle.com](mailto:maryann@marianmantle.com)