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16 PAGES

## Inside

### Elmira's Notre Dame makes campaign public

Nearly \$1.6 M raised for school expansion — Page 2



### Sisters of St. Joseph move to new location

Residents enjoy new home on French Road — Page 3

### Donors ask dioceses to detail abuse-suit costs

Say Catholics will otherwise lose confidence — Page 4

### Diocesan schools mark Catholic Schools Week

Students celebrate with special events — Pages 7-10



### First-time retreat held for junior-high students

'The Rock' highlights fun and faith — Page 11



A family's message to the lost crew of the space shuttle Columbia is surrounded by flowers at a memorial in Titusville, Fla., Feb. 2. Columbia's crew of seven perished as the shuttle broke up over Texas during re-entry Feb. 1.

## Mourning the Columbia crew

### Space shuttle exploded over Texas on flight home following 16-day mission

WASHINGTON — Catholics grieved and prayed over the fate of the seven astronauts who perished Feb. 1 when the space shuttle Columbia exploded on re-entry into Earth's atmosphere over Texas following a 16-day mission.

The pilot, Navy Cmdr. William C. McCool, 41, was a Catholic. It was McCool's first space mission.

His pastor, Carmelite Father J.J. McCarthy of St. Bernadette Parish in the Houston suburb of Clear Lake City, Texas, said McCool left behind a wife and three children. "We're here to serve them," he said.

Father McCarthy said St. Bernadette is one of three Catholic parishes with a large contingent of NASA workers and their families. He said he detected "shock, grief, an outpouring of

grief" the weekend of the accident. "The long-timers, they had the Challenger some years ago (in 1986). They see it as round two," the priest said. "They're just stunned."

Their wound, Father McCarthy added, is "more profound — a wound that had been healing" until the Columbia disaster. "They were hoping it would never happen again, and all of a sudden it does."

He told Catholic News Service that Masses in the 3,500-household parish were full over the weekend, but that "what seemed to be different to me was in the way people were coming to Mass. They were seeking an outpouring of faith and hope."

Father McCarthy said he first heard of the shuttle accident nine minutes after it happened as he was listening to National Public Radio. He added the parish planned a prayer service for Feb. 3.

Jesuit Father John P. Schlegel, president of Creighton University in Omaha, Neb., noted in a statement that Columbia's

Continued on page 6

Story and photos by Catholic News Service

