

Services slated for military families

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

Shortly after Sept. 11, 2001, Mary A. Bills said her son, Mark, was working at his part-time job waiting tables in a restaurant when some patriotic customers chided him for not wearing flag pins as they were.

"He said, 'I don't wear a pin because I put my life on the line for you every day,'" Bills said her son told the customers. What the customers didn't know, she said, is that her son is in the Air Force. She added that they apparently were humbled by their waiter's retort.

"They were pretty sheepish, and I think they left him a big tip," she said with a chuckle.

Bills is one of many parents whose children are currently serving in the military and who is awaiting news of whether the United States will launch an all-out invasion of Iraq. Mark Bills, 27, a staff sergeant stationed in Alaska, she said, has not yet learned if he will be deployed to serve in any potential conflict.

"It's all in the hands of God, so that's the only way I can look at it in order to stay sane," said Bills, a pastoral and youth minister at Guardian Angels Parish in Henrietta. She added that she is proud of her son, an orthopaedic surgical technician, who hasn't been home for Christmas since he joined the Air Force, for a special reason.

"He's not married, and he's always served all the holidays so that married people can be with their families," she said.

Bills is among those military families "left behind," according to Father Joseph Marcoux, parochial vicar at Rochester's Sacred Heart Cathedral, 296 Flower City Park. At 7 p.m. every Tuesday during Lent —



Reuters/CNS

Former U.S. Marine and Vietnam veteran Robert Berg waves a U.S. flag as the amphibious assault ship USS Boxer sets out from the San Diego Naval Station Jan. 17 for deployment to the Middle East. Sacred Heart Cathedral in the Diocese of Rochester has planned ecumenical prayer services during Lent for people who have family members in the military.

March 11, 18, 25, and April 1 and 8 — Sacred Heart will host ecumenical prayer services for families of military personnel, he said.

Father Marcoux asked that people with family members in the military bring one photo of their loved one that could be exchanged for the photo of a military person from another family attending. That way, he said, families can take home the photos and pray for other people's children.

He added that he was inspired to schedule the services after seeing the concern in the eyes of a couple whose son in the Marines attended Mass with them at the cathedral. Father Marcoux said there is "a lot of sadness" among such families now, and that the church needs to be there for families of military personnel.

One such family is the Hutchings of Brockport, who attend Nativity of

the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish. Jessica Hutchings, 21, is a private first class in the Marines and left for Kuwait Feb. 7, according to her mother, Rosemary Hutchings. Jessica's mother teaches religious education at the parish, and said she welcomed the coming prayer services at Sacred Heart.

"I really do believe in the power of prayer, and these kids will be held up and carried through," she said.

Hutchings said her daughter relied on her faith to make it through boot camp.

"She'd be the first to say without her faith she absolutely would not have made it," Hutchings said.

Faith is also sustaining June Cafaro, a parishioner at St. Patrick Parish in Seneca Falls, whose son, William, 42, is a medical corpsman

in the Army Reserves who may go overseas.

"A mother always worries about losing a child," she said. "But you have to believe and know that when your child's time has been called, just like yours, whether he's crossing the street or in a war, that's his time and that's God's business, not your own."

All three mothers had different feelings about the possible war itself. Hutchings said that it is sometimes difficult to hear so many conflicting messages about the war, including ones from the pulpit. She added that she has had to directly face critics from her community who are opposed to a possible war.

"In as much as I don't want us to go to war ... I have to stand behind our country," Hutchings said.

Bills said she believed that more time should be given to the weapons inspections process. Yet she noted that she also wants to support her son should he have to go to war.

"I don't agree with the war," she said. "I don't think it's a just war. I think it's an abomination. But this is the path that my son has taken and what do you do as a mother but love him unconditionally through it," she said.

Cafaro, on the other hand, said she considers President George W. Bush a sincere man of faith whose assessment of the situation could be trusted. She stressed that she does not want to see a war, but if one comes, she prays that it will end quickly.

"If every mother's son stayed home because mom is concerned and doesn't like the thought of them being in a war situation we would have no one left to protect us," she said.

Regardless of one's views on the possible war, Father Marcoux emphasized that prayer, not politics, would be the focal point of the services he planned.

"It's not about promoting is it right or is it wrong to go to war," he said. "I have no agenda but to pray for these people."

And Hutchings noted that the God to whom everyone would be praying should not be blamed for the current crisis.

"God doesn't want this war, and he's not making this happen," she said. "It's people who are making bad decisions that are making this happen."

She added that she'll continue to do what she can to foster peace on earth.

"If you're living the Gospel, you have to spread peace to the people around you," she said.

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