***My Son, My Son***

Years ago, when our children were still in elementary and middle school, I was in Pittsburgh, PA taking the Eucharist to a shut in who was a member of our parish. Since this was the era before cell phones, I simply called the Rectory from the woman’s apartment in order to “check in” at home. A parishioner answered the phone and said, “Don’t worry, everything is going to be okay, and I have your daughters with me.” These sentences, of course, always cause the mind to wonder what the next sentence will be. The parishioner went on to say that our son was among those in the classroom who had been overcome by carbon monoxide, and that the victims were taken to the hospital and my wife was on her way to meet the ambulances. Again, the mind so very often recalls seeing numerous scenes on television, and as a priest, I had been in the middle of such scenes.

I left the apartment and drove the 20+ miles that suddenly seemed like an eternity. I was able to access the local radio station only to hear the announcer say, “They are dropping like flies at the middle school.” The trip suddenly seemed longer and as I drove and cried and prayed, as if it were a Litany I prayed, “My son, my son, my only son – Lord, please save him.” I understood the cry of King David as he cried out for his son, Absalom, and, indeed, my mind went to the phrases in the New Testament, “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.” The Father knew the pain of the Son.

As I arrived at the hospital with my reversible stole (purple on one side and white on the other: white for the Sacrament of Life and purple for Supplication), I was grateful to have the Blessed Sacrament with me – one host left from the visit of the parishioner, and, as always, my oil stock with the Oil for the Sick, the Television cameras caught me and later on the news reported, “Fr. Ackerman is arriving at the hospital to anoint those who have been overcome by carbon monoxide.” Later I would see the expression on my face – one that reflected fear and faith working in tension with each other. As I rushed into the hospital parents grabbed me asking me to pray for their children, which I did as I worked my way to the ICU where those who were most overcome were being treated. There was our son, with my dear wife sitting next to him.

By God’s most gracious favor he recovered well, but in the midst of it I spent hours with others who were struck by the fragility of life.

In many ways, it was a bonding experience for parents and students, as they met, as it were, at the foot of the cross. As I read our son’s birthday greetings just days ago on his 45th birthday, I noted how the vast majority of those greetings were from fellow students from that town – friends who bonded even more significantly those 35 years ago as they “dropped like flies.”

Tragedy can divide or unite people. Those of faith are united, for they know that in the midst of adversity they will find their solace in the Savior of the world. Those who believe that they can resolve their fears on their own, all too often can fall into the lonely pit of despair.

I cried that day for my son, and I entered into the affirming love of the Father, who had entrusted to me a son whose pain became my own, and whose victory over potential death drew me closer with gratitude to the One who had given to me that gift of life.