

God and the Special Needs Child: one father's journey of faith

By: Edward J. Nitkewicz

My life changed forever on August 1, 1995.

On that terrible day, the kindest man that I ever knew died at the age of 53. My father was a quiet man from a family of first generation Americans who emigrated from Poland. His parents were divorced in the 1950's when families were rarely broken. He did not have the opportunity to attend college. He did not participate in organized sports. As an adult, he worked not one, but two full time jobs which he supplemented by working weekends for a plumbing company and a caterer. He was as hard working as he was humble. I loved and admired him deeply.

The most important "things" in my father's life were his family and his faith. One would expect a man who worked nearly every waking hour of the first six days of the week would make Sunday the day for him and him alone. Yet, every Sunday started at St. William the Abbott and later Maria Regina Roman Catholic Churches. He attended mass every week. Though he was almost shy, he was dedicated to his faith with a commitment I never thought I would understand.

Many of us inherit our parents' religion. However, it is our own personal journey that establishes our commitment to faith.

When my father died, a friend who had similarly experienced the loss of a parent consoled me that one day the experience of grieving my father would "make me a better man." I was flabbergasted. I could not begin to comprehend any possible interpretation of losing my father that would be "good." Yet, fifteen years later, I believe it triggered my own journey of faith.

In the years following my father's death, my grandfather died prematurely after falling from a ladder, my grandmother died suddenly after being diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer, and my wife and I suffered the heartbreak of a miscarriage. During those trying years, I often lamented that I must have surely "made God angry."

Finally, in 1998, my wife and I were blessed when our son was born. He was beautiful, he was healthy and he was a well needed blessing from God. After the trials and tribulations that I endured since the loss of my father, my son's

birth was a sign that blessings truly come to those who are patient in their faith.

Just two years later, my wife and I learned the devastating news that my precious son suffered from autism.

Of the many aspects of my life that was immediately and negatively impacted by my son's diagnoses was my faith. Clearly, my son and I must have been forsaken by God. Obviously, God **was** angry with me. I could not otherwise fathom why God would impose what would surely be a lifetime of limitations and emotional devastation upon me, my wife and my son. After a few half hearted attempts to find solace at Sunday morning Mass, I stopped attending services altogether. I could not bring myself to worship in a church that could not bestow the sacraments of communion, penance and confirmation upon my son. I could not find peace or the answer to that "why" question in the Sunday liturgy or during my evening prayers.

After a few years of maneuvering through the maze of autism, I came to believe that I was a better father to my son **because** he was diagnosed with autism. I started to realize that despite the many ups and downs in my life, my commitment to being a good father to my son was yielding positive results in both our lives. Most importantly, I determined that I was at peace with my son's disabilities because I continued to have faith in God and his plan for Edward. I renewed my commitment to my Church and found weekly comfort as I returned to Sunday morning Mass.

Last year, I approached the director of religious education in my parish with a proposal for a self-contained religious instruction program tailored to the special needs of children like my son. The program would be geared towards teaching children with special needs the two essential foundational elements of Judeo-Christian faith: believe in God and love each other. I was confident that children with special needs could learn and understand those fundamental tenants provided that they were taught in an environment tailored to their unique individual needs.

With the blessing of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, St. Elizabeth Roman Catholic Church of South Huntington launched a unique program of faith formation. Our students have a variety of limitations in receptive and perceptive language, emotional impairments and other learning disabilities and yet, they have all successfully undertaken their own personal journey of faith. We teachers are required to know nothing more complicated than love of God and love of our delightful students. Our program of special needs faith formation will allow each of our children to find their own unique personal relationship with God and to celebrate the Holy Sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church.

Ten years ago I struggled with the “why” question. As I continue through this remarkable journey of faith and fatherhood, I have found my way to the answer. Because I was blessed.