

# **BEREAVEMENT CONFERENCE**

**SAVE THE DATE**

**SATURDAY**

**MARCH 19, 2011**

**DETAILS TO FOLLOW**

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# Sharing grief can help in healing

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MARY IAPALUCCI | TLIC

Elaine Stillwell, right, diocesan bereavement coordinator, assists a conference participant at the information desk.

**UNIONDALE** — While living with grief is a journey into unknown territory, “hope is the fuel for our journey,” Dominican Sister Ave Clark told the 400 participants at the annual diocesan bereavement conference. “Put hope in your spirit and trust others,” she said in the keynote address of the day-long conference held at Bishop Kellenberg Memorial High School here March 20.

The bereavement conference, sponsored by the diocesan Catholic cemeteries office, offered a program of speakers and workshops for those who are grieving and those who work in bereavement ministries.

“We need to share our journeys, our strengths, our struggles and our setbacks,” said Sister Ave, a member of the Amityville Sisters of St. Dominic for 47 years. She coordinates the Heart to Heart Ministry in Queens, which offers counseling and support for a wide variety of people with wounded hearts including victims of crime and abuse, grief, post traumatic stress and mental illness.

“Grief puts us on a road less traveled,” she said. “Our life feels upside down and inside out. At times we don’t even recognize ourselves.”

Yet these “detours” can offer new life, and “blessings, filled with the grace of acceptance and the support of compassionate friends, and even strangers we meet. The blessing is to know the presence of care coming from an open heart,” she said.

Sister Ave shared stories from her life, eliciting both laughter and tears from the audience. She walks with a cane and gave her talk while kneeling on a chair at the podium due to injuries she suffered in 2004 when a runaway locomotive crashed into her car.

“You and I make the choice to be better and not bitter. Choose to be people of hope,” she urged.

“Faith lived is love multiplied. It certainly is here today,” said Sister Ave. “Where there is faith, there is love. Where there is love, there is peace. Where there is peace, there can be hope. Where there is hope there is God’s love embracing you.”

She related an experience from her days as a teacher for mentally challenged children. When the brother of a classmate died, the children instinctively offered her simple comfort and let her know they cared.

“They taught me a lot about love, life and compassion,” she said. “A simple act of presence can be a healing comfort for the heart and soul.”

Addressing the conference’s theme of “Open My Heart, O Lord,” Sister Ave said, “Your presence here today will touch someone’s heart. May all our hearts today be a source of comfort to one another.”

A journey with grief is full of paradoxes and contradictions, she said. “In tears we can find relief; in death, resurrection. I have learned that sorrow and joy reside side by side.”

Sister Ave concluded her presentation on an upbeat note, encouraging everyone to sing along with the “Hallelujahs” on a song of praise and passing out pastel streamers for people to wave in the front of the audience.

“I’m emotionally wiped out from her talk. It was very poignant,” said Denise Reiley, a bereavement minister at St. Mary’s, East Islip.

This was the tenth diocesan bereavement conference. All of them have been organized by Elaine Stillwell, diocesan bereavement ministries coordinator. Sister Ave presented a glass rose as a symbol of appreciation to Stillwell, who is retiring this spring.

Stillwell became involved in helping others deal with grief after losing two of her children, Denis and Peggy, in a 1986 car accident. She said she plans to continue her work with the Compassionate Friends and writing her column for Grief Digest magazine as well as enjoying time with her husband, Joe, and possibly writing a new book.

In addition to the opening address, the conference included three sets of workshops on a wide variety of topics. Some, like “Help, I’m in charge of finances now,” offered practical tips for coping with the loss of a spouse. Others focused on spiritual topics. There were a series of workshops directed to those involved as leaders of parish and other support groups.

Information on support groups was available in the lobby, where there was also an extensive selection of books offered at discounted prices. Breaks and meals during the day gave people the chance to interact informally. The conference concluded with the celebration of Mass.

For more information about bereavement groups and help available in the diocese, visit the cemeteries office Web site at [www.holyroodcemetery.org](http://www.holyroodcemetery.org) and click on the bereavement link.