

The Blessed Virgin Mary had a difficult start to her adult life. She became pregnant while she was engaged; her fiancé was not the father. She gave birth away from home in rude surroundings. Someone tried to kill her child. She escaped with her family to a foreign country. She also met Simeon, a respected, elderly, holy man, who prophesied beautiful and alarming things about her infant son. He said Jesus was destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and that a sword would pierce Mary's heart.

Christians have been captivated by this image, and during the Middle Ages, people started to catalogue the sorrows of Mary to interpret Simeon's prophecy. The bible never says that Mary had seven sorrows, but tradition eventually settled on that number. Here they are: the prophecy of Simeon, the flight into Egypt, and losing Jesus in the Temple; then, meeting her son on the way to Calvary, standing at the foot of the cross, his descent from the cross, and his burial. All seven pertain to Mary and her son. Each September we have a day on the calendar called Our Lady of Sorrows, and the Catholic church in Hirlingen, Missouri, was named after the same devotion. It's called Seven Dolors, though some people like to call it Seven Dollars Church. Dolor is the Latin word for sorrow or grief, and it exists in English, though it isn't used very much outside of Buchanan County.

In the summer we have a day to commemorate the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Devotion to Mary under this title began in the 17th century and grew after visionary children in Fatima reported that she referred to her Immaculate Heart. Here in St. Munchin Church we have two major stained glass windows devoted to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, one in the narthex and the other in the west wall. The window in the east wall is devoted to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and as you can see, a sword penetrates her heart. These devotions for Mary appealed to people who experienced suffering in their own lives, even within their family. I suspect each one of us probably caused our mothers at least seven sorrows, and almost any parent could list seven sorrows they have felt over the suffering of their children.

Simeon's prophecy is the gospel for Holy Family Sunday this year, and it consoles families in two different ways. First, whatever sorrow you have in your family, you are not alone. Every family has sorrow; even the Holy Family did. Second, don't forget the rest of Simeon's prophecy. He took the infant Jesus into his arms and blessed God, saying, "Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation." The Church recommends we pray Simeon's words every night before going to bed. Each day God reveals salvation to those who open their eyes to see it. Once we see it each day, we are not afraid to die. Mary was probably so aware of God's salvation each day that it overcame every sorrow.

This Christmas we have seen Christ among us in prayer, in charity, and in our families. Even in the most sorrowful family, Christ is present. Salvation is here. No sorrow can prevail over that good news, so we can end each day in peace.