




CALLED

THEY WORK LONG HOURS. THEY SEE THINGS THAT MOST PEOPLE NEVER WISH TO SEE. THEY ARE THERE WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES — RESPONDING TO EMERGENCIES DAY OR NIGHT, THROUGH HARSH RAIN AND DEEP SNOW. FIRST RESPONDERS RUN THE GAMUT OF EXPERIENCES FROM SICK PATIENTS AND CARDIAC ARRESTS TO STRUCTURE FIRES AND VIOLENT CRIMINALS WITH ONE MISSION: TO PROTECT LIVES AND PROPERTY.



The stresses of the job add up over time, and if not grounded in something, those who choose this profession run the risk of burning out and becoming complacent. For three first responders in the Diocese of Erie, it's their Catholic faith that keeps them grounded and always ready to help those in need.

INFLUENCE

Like most faithful Catholics, these first responders were inspired by role models in their lives.

Advanced Emergency Medical Technician (AEMT) Marielle Lafaro of EmeryCare says, "I grew up Catholic, but it wasn't until I attended Gannon University and met Father Edward Krause that I started to become serious about my faith. Father Krause was a professor and friend who inspired me to become passionate about my faith, a faith that ultimately led me to this profession."

Capt. Jill Staaf of the Meadville Fire Department grew up with a mother who instilled in her Catholic values as a child. After Jill moved out of her parents' house, she stopped going to church regularly until her kids started going to Seton Catholic School in Meadville. There, her daughter's kindergarten teacher, Annette Egan, explained to Jill the importance of raising her kids in the faith by participating in Mass and being a role model to them.

"Annette was a big push to get us back, and now we go to weekly Mass again, with all three of my kids participating as altar servers at Epiphany of the Lord Parish," Jill says.

TO SERVE

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
VINCE DRAGONE

Officer Brett Herzing, a police officer at St. Marys Police Department, had a mother who made sure Sundays were reserved for God, even if that meant that as a baseball player, Brett had to miss championship baseball games to attend Mass.

Brett reflects, "Back then, it was hard for me to understand, but these were important lessons my mother was trying to teach me. It didn't strike me how influential she was until she passed away eight years ago, just before the birth of my first daughter."

Brett was angry with God for taking his mother so soon, but it did not stop him from taking his baby to Mass and reading the Bible to her.

"I did all of this while trying to forget about God, but realized he never forgot about me. If it weren't for my mother, I wouldn't have the faith I have now. When problems come my way, I go right to my faith," Brett says.

A HIGHER CALLING

For Marielle, being an AEMT is more than just a job — it's a calling.

Marielle explains, "For me, becoming an emergency medical



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technician was a direct mission from God. I was working as a teacher at St. George School. I loved my job and my students but couldn't help but feel the stirring of the Holy Spirit."

Marielle didn't know what God was calling her to do but felt as though he was leading her in a new direction. She spent several months praying for an answer before she received it during adoration.

"Father Michael Polinek was hosting a Holy Hour for vocations at St. Peter Cathedral. I didn't originally plan on going, but one of my students encouraged me to. As we were all praying the rosary, it came to me like a voice out of nowhere: 'EMT!' I remember feeling so shocked that this idea was planted in my

head in front of the Blessed Sacrament," Marielle recalls.

Marielle spent the next few months taking classes to become an EMT, leaving her teaching job and being hired by EmergyCare, where she later became an AEMT.

FAITH ON THE JOB

First responders deal with both minor and major incidents concerning people from all walks of life. According to NENA, the 911 Association, a nonprofit whose focus is to improve the 911 system across America, approximately 240 million 911 calls are made each year. With the large call volumes that emergency services must deal with, it can be easy to lose tempers and take out stress on patients and callers.

Jill says that she finds herself thinking about her faith when she responds to minor calls for service. She recognizes that while it may seem like an inconvenience for her, it is a real emergency for the caller, which leads her to treat the patient with respect, much like Jesus would.

Marielle recognizes that she can't solve all her patients' problems, but on the worst day of their lives, she can reassure and love them.

"I rely heavily on my faith when I interact with my patients. Even though I can't share my faith beliefs with them in



YOU SEE THE TEACHERS AND STUDENTS WITH THEIR PARENTS FROM SCHOOL GOING TO MASS AND IT BECOMES MORE LIKE A FAMILY, SUPPORTING EACH OTHER ALONG THE WAY."



the back of an ambulance, I can share the spirit of my faith and the hope I have in eternal life,” says Marielle.

First responders encounter calls with traumatic outcomes. According to a journal published by the College of Psychology, Nova Southeastern University, more than 80 percent of first responders experience traumatic events on the job. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety and depression all can result from responding to and witnessing trauma.

Marielle says, “We encounter very dark and difficult calls to process but being able to return to my faith gives me hope that whatever happens, we are waiting for something greater. The pain and suffering I witness through this job isn’t the final word. One of the greatest blessings I can offer my patients is my prayers for them.”

Brett prays for many of the people he deals with while patrolling St. Marys. He remembers a particular incident where a mentally unstable career criminal fought Brett and his partner while they were trying to remove him for trespassing.

“Out of nowhere, we were both on the ground, fighting and struggling with him as he was trying to hurt us any way he could,” Brett says.

Once they brought the man back to the station, he became verbally abusive and, in detail, threatened to kill Brett and his family when he got out of jail.

Brett recalls, “That morning when I went home, I sat on the couch, relived the incident and prayed that this man would finally realize the error of his ways and get the help he needs.”

BLUE SHEPHERDS

The Diocese of Erie provides a service to some first responders in the form of chaplains. One such chaplain was Father John Detisch, who served the Erie Police Department (EPD) for 31 years before recently being transferred to St. Tobias Parish in Brockway.

The role of a chaplain is to minister to first responders, offering spiritual and sometimes psychological guidance to deal with many of the traumatic experiences they go through.

“Even the most seasoned officers still feel the need to talk to the chaplain to clear their heads,” Father John says. “These are tough men and women, but they tend to internalize things. Usually, when they met with me, they were at the end of their rope. Luckily, they were strong enough to admit that they needed help.”

In November 2021, EPD lost two officers to COVID-19 within 10 days of each other. The sudden loss of these officers sent grief through the department. Father John spent a good deal of time helping EPD’s officers get through and reconcile the tragic situation.

COMMUNITY

Jill, Marielle and Brett are passionate about serving their communities, and they all recognize that communities aren’t built around just one or two people. Thriving communities must include the contribution of everyone, especially in parishes.

Jill believes raising her kids in the faith is more manageable within the parish community.

“You see the teachers and students with their parents from school going to Mass,” she says, “and it becomes more like a family, supporting each other along the way.”

Marielle has similar feelings about parish communities.



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“We need each other, especially in today’s day and age. Having a community in the church helps maintain the enthusiasm for the sacraments. If I’m having a lull in my faith, I know I have friends who can help me overcome that,” she says.

Brett, who belongs to Sacred Heart Parish in St. Marys, loves to talk about how tightly knit his parish community is, which inspires him to continue to serve the people of St. Marys to the best of his abilities, even to the point of sacrificing time away from his young family while working the night shift.

When talking about his wife, Brett says, “She is also with me on my faith journey. She is my rock, and whenever I have doubts about my faith, she is the one I go to.”

These first responders have their communities at the heart of what they do, and each of them has had their faith impact their careers in different ways.

For Brett, the impact is direct and profound.

“When I receive the Eucharist at Mass, I thank God for it and ask him to let it overcome my body, and that when people see me, I want them to see him. When they hear me, I want them to hear him.” †



SCAN THE QR CODE TO WATCH THE VIDEO CALLED TO SERVE, FEATURING MARIELLE, JILL AND BRETT.