



THE HESTER FAMILY:

Hearts open to the gift of life

By Timothy Hester

"You need to come home and take Mom to Mary Ann's."

"Sure," I said. "Why?"

"Something happened to Fiona at the pool. She's being taken to the hospital. That's all I know."

That was all I needed to know. I was visiting my sister, Barbara, who lives three blocks from me. I had to take Mom to our sister Mary Ann's house in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, a two and a half hour drive from Newark, because Fiona is Mary Ann's daughter.

On walking into my parents' home—which for so many years has been the family gathering place—the enormity of what was happening started to fall upon me. Other sisters were there—Maureen, Mary Lou and her husband Jim. My family has a knack for occasionally over-dramatizing events, but the wailing I heard told me this was different. Although there was hardly a moment for questions, I managed to squeeze in "What exactly happened?" before finding myself back behind the wheel. Mom

told me Fiona was found in the pool. Her use of that verb frightened me beyond words. At that moment, I took out a small rosary ring that I keep in the console of my car and began to pray. As I counted out the beads, more information came through to us.

At one point, Mom and I were both on our phones, each with conference calls going. I said to my mother, "She's not quite two. This can't be happening to us again." We got a call. Fiona was on a ventilator. That sounded promising. We still had another two hours to drive. When we began crossing over the unusually lifeless Delaware River, however, that promise was snatched away from us. As I was paying the toll, Mom's phone rang. She simply put the phone down and said, "Oh no." I knew what that meant. I cut across seven lanes of traffic, pulled onto the shoulder and wept. My little niece was dead.

Nevertheless, as tears fell from my eyes I knew this was not the end of the story. Nor was it the beginning. This was all part of an ongoing gift exchange.

The Hester legacy

I was born into an already large family. By large, I do not mean four or five children and a few pets. No, that only seems large to a generation accustomed to the statistical norm of 2.5 children in a nuclear family. Before you read on brace yourself, take a breath, clear your mind.

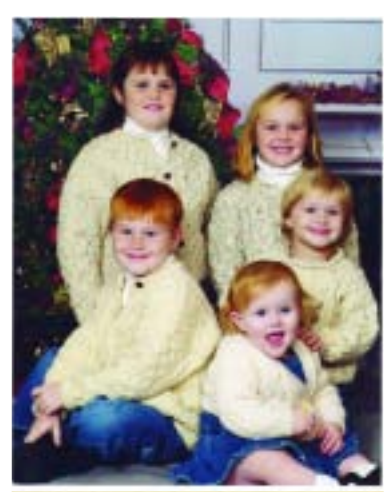
In 1977 my twin sister and I became the 14th and 15th children born to Dick and Mary Ann Hester. In 1980, my parents brought one more of us—my sister Bridget—into the world. Sixteen children in 23 years of marriage is nothing to sneeze at. But when they had reached 10 children, they certainly were not alone. In their Philadelphia neighborhood, at least three other families had the same number of children.

Yet something happened in the decade of my birth that changed the face of the American family. The Supreme Court decided that ending the life of a preborn child was a constitutional right. I'm not suggesting that couples otherwise inclined to raising children suddenly got abortions instead. However, the ruling was the capstone in a slow chipping away at society's respect for the sanctity of human life. Attitudes changed, hearts hardened, smaller hearts stopped beating.

*On facing page: A typical Hester gathering—
Meave Gaffney's baptism May 2006*



Mary Lou, Maureen, Susan, Brian, Richard, Siobhan, Edward, Mary Ann, Paul, Sean, Owen, Tim, Barbara, Teresa and Matthew on Easter 1980, before Bridget was born



*The Gaffney children,
Christmas 2005*

My parents, on the other hand, went into their marriage with a mutual love for children. To them, children were a joy, a blessing and a gift. To this day, when someone hears how many siblings I have, they say: "God bless your mother!" and I always tell them her response. She says, "He has. Sixteen times."

Mom was 40 years old when my twin sister, Teresa, and I were born. Because of Dad's job, our family had relocated to Syracuse, New York when Mom found out that she was pregnant again. She was, as always, filled with joy. She went to a new doctor at the local

hospital for an exam. "Mrs. Hester, at your age, I think you should consider an abortion," was the last thing she thought she would hear. The New Yorker in her welled up and after giving the doctor a piece of her mind, she left, slamming the door behind her.

On the drive home alone, she wept. Still sobbing later when she opened the local newspaper, she began to read an article about the new pope. He had granted an interview to the Italian media and he was asked who his heroes were. His response buoyed Mom's heart. To him, 20th century mothers who chose to have large numbers of children, bringing into the world God's most precious gifts despite the world's scorn, were great heroes. The new pope would become familiar to us all as the greatest defender of life in our time. Twenty-eight years later, as John Paul the Great went home to his reward, his words came back to Mom when she came across that article. She thought about how her blessings had multiplied many times over because her children had, by then, given her 38 grandchildren.

The gift exchange

This is not to say that we haven't known sorrow. On a cold winter night in 1982, our house caught fire. Three of us, Matthew, Owen and my twin Teresa, did not make it out. Our faith and the love of those around us helped pull us through the devastating loss. For us, the belief that death is not the end of life but merely a change in life, had to become a reality.

A few years later, my parents got a call that my oldest brother's son and his two half-sisters were in trouble. Their mother had been

arrested and they didn't know where to go. Without hesitation Mom and Dad said, "Come with us." Sadly, the lifestyle maintained by their mother claimed her life at 40 years of age. Mom's response was the same as always. She said, "I lost three and I've gained three. We've raised them as a family for 12 years now." We buried their mom with our three children. To us, life is sacred, not merely a cohesive mass of cells.

Against a backdrop filled with joy and sorrow, consider this. If life is a gift, then what does gift mean? It isn't enough for us as pro-life people to utter platitudes and never really understand them. A gift is not solely something that we receive. It is something we cooperate in giving as well. That two-way, reciprocal avenue of love is gift. It is a gift that God blessed Mom and Dad with so many children, but it was also a gift that they received those children, reared them in love and sent them off into the world to do likewise.

As I now think of Fiona, I am reminded that how her parents met is another great testament to my parents' teaching that life is a gift. In 1993, Mary Ann graduated from Christendom College armed with a Catholic education including moral theology and political science. In 1994, while Mary Ann was working as a schoolteacher, she became alarmed that no congressional candidates in New Jersey's 13th district were pro-life, so she decided to run. With Dad as her campaign manager, Mary Ann ran as a Republican and went door to door, telling Catholics of Irish and Italian heritage that it was their duty to vote pro-life. As a result, many of them changed party affiliation in order to vote for

Mary Ann in the primary.

That same year, in order to network with voters and support a charity, Mary Ann and my parents went a pro-life ball in New York. In preparing for the ball, Mary Ann attempted to touch up her blonde hair, but something went horribly wrong. The dye turned her hair a dull green. Despite her green hair, Brendan Gaffney was attracted to Mary Ann Hester. Any woman, he figured, brave enough to go to a pro-life ball with green hair was his kind of woman. Mary Ann lost the political primary, but she won the heart of Brendan, they married and became the happy parents of six children.



Fiona

Upon the tragic loss of little Fiona, Mary Ann, Brendan and all of us were called to see clearly with eyes of faith: Fiona was another gift we had to return to God. As we prepared to let the mourners into the church for Fiona's viewing, Mary Ann said to me, "I want the casket left open." I gasped because I couldn't imagine anyone wanting to go through the pain of seeing a dead baby. But

Mary Ann insisted, "My baby is beautiful. She is God's precious gift and I want everyone to see that." She was right and I'm happy that so many friends came to see her beauty and celebrate her return to God.

Since we've been speaking of gifts, I will leave you with a closing thought. We Hesters remember the childhood excitement of Christmas morning. What child do you know that has ever said of the gifts under the tree: "There are too many; take some away." Gift-giving always involves gift-receiving. In my life, this is probably the most important lesson I have learned. I try every day—in remembering Fi and Teresa, Owen, Matthew and so many others—to think of how full our lives have been because someone received them from God. When you think it's time to say to God: "Not so many, Lord," think of us and know that He never gives you more than you can handle and, even better, He always rewards your acceptance of His gifts. As I prepare to enter into married life with my darling fiancée, I am grateful for all my gifts and I hope for many more.

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Dick and Mary Ann Hester with all but one of their living children at Bridget's wedding



*Mary Ann holding
Fiona and her
nephew Rimmy*