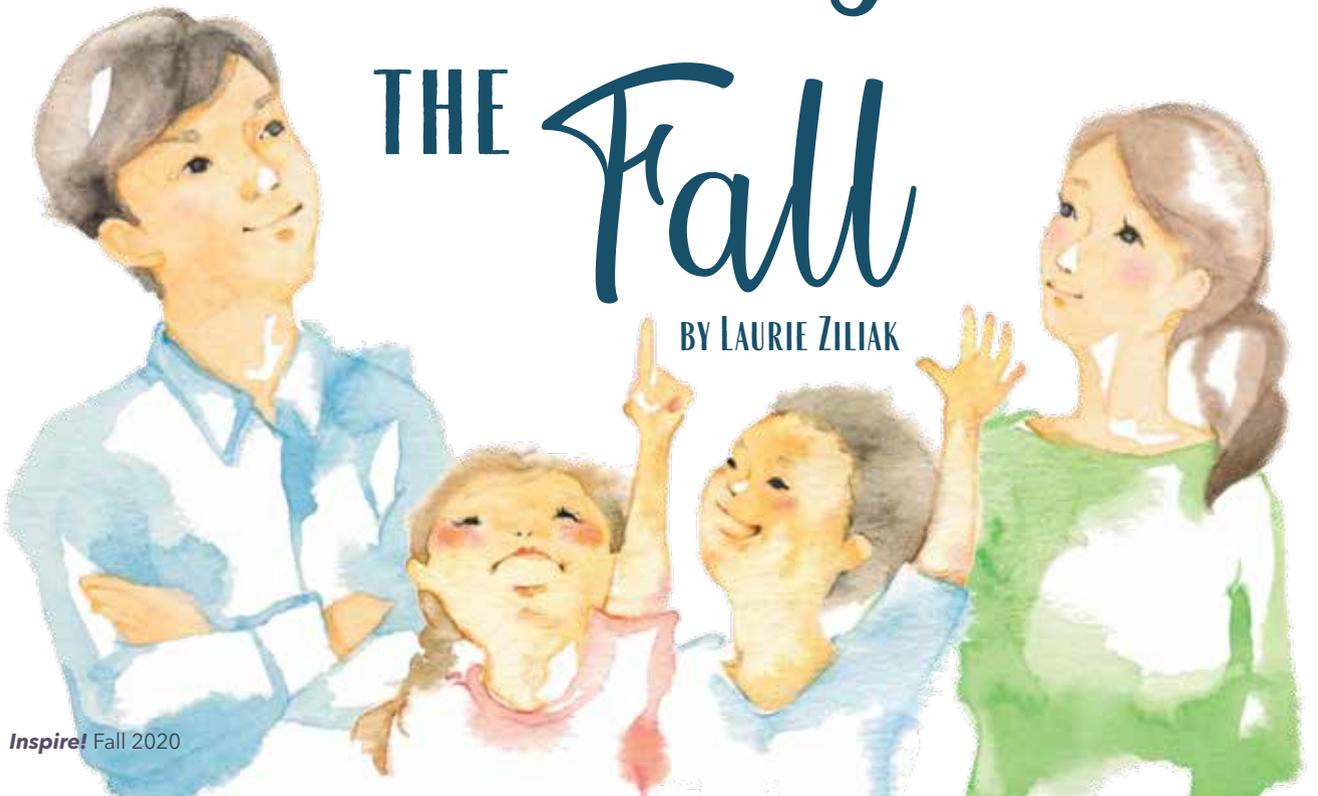




# Facing THE Fall

BY LAURIE ZILIAK





This fall, the return to school and parish programs will be like no other, just as the conclusion of the previous year was like no other. Our church has changed. Our educational system has changed. Our students have changed. We have changed. Nothing is the same as it was in February. Many have suffered personal loss, and our nation has suffered a huge collective loss. **The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will continue for years.**

As teachers and catechists, we have a unique place in the lives of our students. Facing our new reality can be daunting, and accepting the loss can be heart-wrenching, but if we approach the fall prayerfully and intentionally, we can be a force for good. The following strategies are some to consider as we begin this new academic year.

## PRIORITIZING THE PERSONAL

The first few weeks of school and parish programs are typically about making sure everyone has the right school supplies and understands the parameters of class expectations. While those are and continue to be important tasks, we need to build in time for personal connections and check-ins, regardless of whether we are online or in person. **We need to provide time for students to talk about their experiences since March** (and share our own as well). We need to create space for students to talk about how they are feeling and what may be sources of anxiety.

Checking in with children and families individually, even for just a quick 10 minutes to gauge their emotional health and current challenges, will be important. Knowing the students and their families personally is always important, but it becomes the highest priority as we seek to move through the COVID-19 pandemic.





## NAMING THE LOSS

Every single person has experienced loss as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Lost lives, lost jobs, lost stability—the numbers and ramifications are staggering. Some losses may not seem as big as others but are nonetheless significant. The loss of the end of a school year meant many students were unable to participate in events they looked forward to, such as the end-of-the-year choir concert or simply being with their friends each day. Some experienced loss during the summer through the closure of local playgrounds or anticipated summer camps that didn't happen. **We must allow children to name their losses and acknowledge each as significant.** We shouldn't attempt to play the role of mental health professionals but rather create space for students to articulate their disappointments and affirm their feelings of loss.



## IDENTIFYING RESOURCES

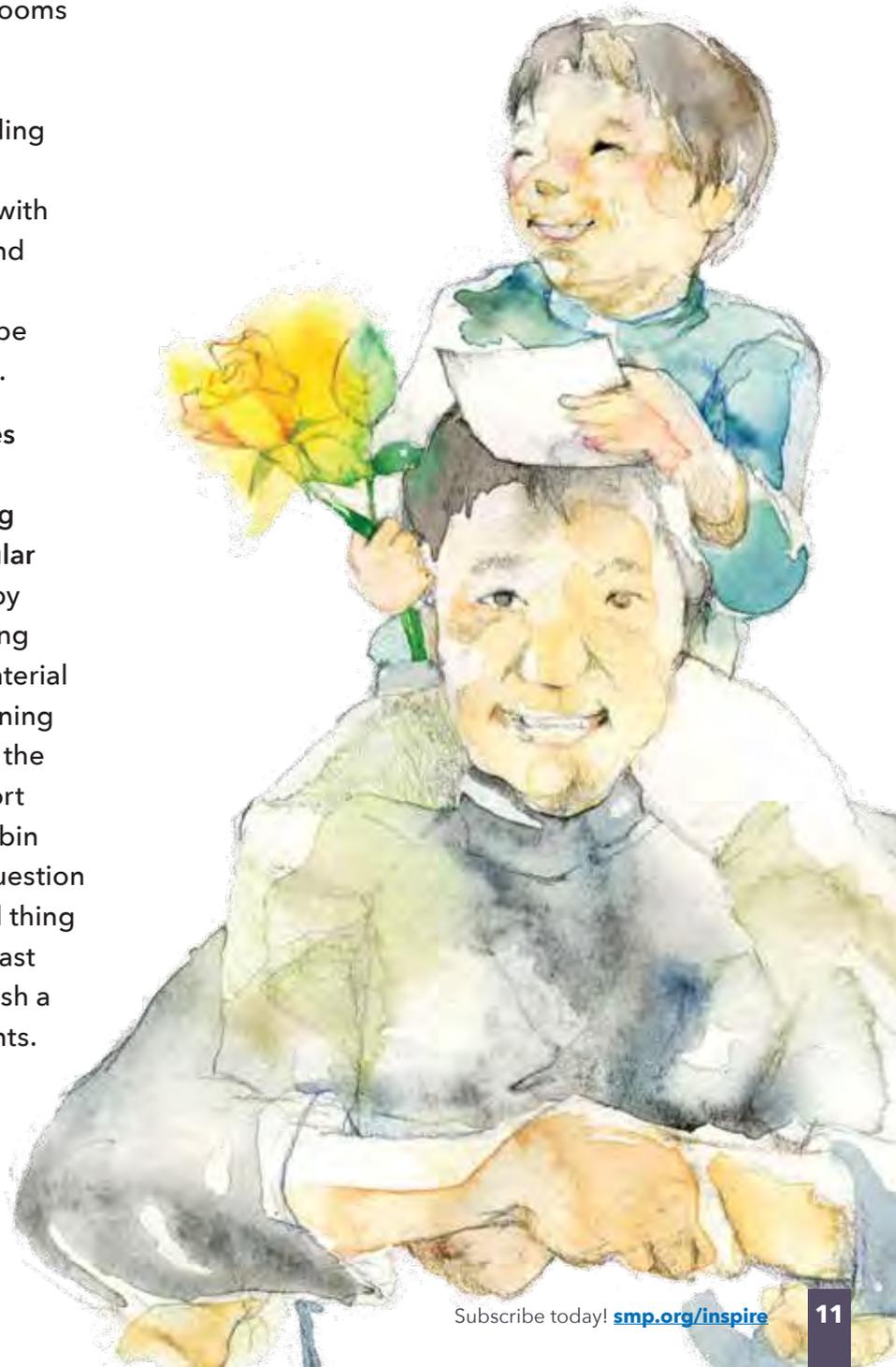
As children speak of their losses, significant needs may become apparent. Many local resources can provide assistance, including local food banks, mental health services, parish staff and spiritual resources, and many others. We've all spent the last few months in survival mode, attending to only the most basic necessities. As we move forward, other needs may become more apparent or more pronounced. We are not equipped to handle all of them, but we can provide support and direct people to the right resources.



## PROVIDING STABILITY AND STRUCTURE

Establishing routines and expectations is essential now more than ever. We can help to ease anxieties by creating schedules within our classrooms and sharing them with our students. Posting daily or weekly schedules and sending them home can work well. Beginning each gathering with prayer—the same prayer—and allowing time to simply be together and check in can be comforting to our students.

Providing stability becomes even more important if we are not physically gathering with the children on a regular basis. Creating schedules by establishing online gathering times and due dates for material to be submitted and beginning each online gathering with the same routine, such as a short prayer and quick, round-robin check-in focused on one question (such as “What is one good thing that has happened in the past week?”) can help to establish a sense of stability for students.



## PROVIDING HOPE

As we move forward, our students are bound to carry their fears and anxiety from the past months with them. **We need to be a voice of hope at every turn.** This does not mean being overly optimistic or Polyanna-ish. Rather, we must provide the hope that is so central to our faith—hope that death and fear are conquered by love and that death is overcome in the Resurrection. Many Bible verses and stories speak of hope (a quick online search will provide many) and can be used in group prayer and shared with children and parents virtually. There are also many age-appropriate stories that speak of suffering and hope (such as the caterpillar becoming the butterfly) that we can incorporate into our educational materials.

This year has undoubtedly been a time of significant trauma for all of us. As we slowly return to our previous patterns and seek to establish new ones, we will quickly realize that we need to embrace a new normal. Children will likely struggle, but by being intentional, we can guide them to a new reality that is realistic and, ultimately, to a good place. ■



# A Prayer for the New Year by Julie Mickler

Creator God,

We ask you to bless each of us as we continue to make sense of our experiences of sheltering at home and being away from school, church, one another. Please give us the wisdom to continue to grow from these experiences.

Let us give thanks for all those who sacrificed so much for the wellness of others.

Let us pray for those who suffered and died during this pandemic.

Let us lift up those in our communities, nation, and world who gave us hope.

Let us remember we are a global family, united in love.

Bless each of us with your gracious love. May we never take for granted the blessing of being together.

Amen.

