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Staff Photo by Larry McDevitt

Pallbearers try to console each other in the parking lot of St. Peter's Church after the funeral of Michael Pozzani, who was flying in the helicopter that collided with an airplane carrying, among others, Sen. John Heinz.

Hundreds of mourners gather to help lay pilot Pozzani to rest

By MICHAEL P. RELAHAN
Staff Writer

WEST NANTMEAL — Those assembled in St. Peter's Church for Michael Pozzani's funeral Tuesday barely needed to look at their hymnals as the organist started playing midway through the service.

Perhaps they had heard the opening strains of the hymn before. Or maybe they just knew somehow it would be one of the many played as they said goodbye to Pozzani, the veteran helicopter pilot who died in a midair collision over Merion Elementary School last week.

But most in the crowd of about 300 mourners began singing by heart along with soloist Alicia Plunkett as Michael Joncas' hymn, "On Eagles' Wings" began.

*He will raise you up on eagles' wings.
Bear you on the breath of dawn.
Make you to shine like the sun.
And hold you in the palm of his hands.*

The image of flight was very much a part of Pozzani's Mass of Christian Burial, as one might think he would want it to be. Friends said Pozzani was never happier than when he was in the sky, flying toward the heavens.

But more than that was the love that Pozzani held for his family, friends and colleagues, and the concern for others that he displayed in his life.

It was this sense of concern that led Pozzani, 42, and his friend and fellow pilot, Charles Burke of Parkesburg to the skies over Merion Thursday in their Sun Co. Bell helicopter.

A twin-engine Aerostar plane radioed for help as the two men were shuttling Sun Co. executives to and from the firm's Radnor headquarters. The plane's pilot couldn't tell if the plane's landing gear were deployed and needed someone to

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check the front wheel.

Pozzani and Burke, 42, flew to the plane and tried to help. Tragically, the two aircraft collided and crashed over the schoolyard, where students were playing.

The two men were killed in the crash, as were Pennsylvania U.S. Sen. John Heinz, the two pilots flying his commuter plane, and two schoolgirls on the ground.

The circumstances of Pozzani's death were barely touched upon at his funeral, but the image of the 15-year county resident giving of himself

for others was never far from view.

The Rev. Francis Bielaki, pastor of St. Peter's, reminded the mourners of Pozzani's "God-given conviction that he was called to be the keeper of his brother and sister, and for the good stewardship of God's conviction."

"Michael Pozzani was a man who was willing to help carry the burdens of others," Bielaki said. And in that way, "he fulfilled the law of Christ."

Pozzani's brother-in-law, William Newlin, eulogized Pozzani as a shy, quiet man who nevertheless loved

laughter and fellowship.

He shared a "very special love" with his wife, Lorraine Pozzani, and with his other family and friends, Newlin said.

"We are all a part of the fabric of his life," Newlin said, speaking to the crowd of mourners. "And all our paths have crossed with his in love."

Newlin also paid tribute to Sun Co. for which Pozzani was a pilot for the past 10 years. He also helped Burke get a job with the company.

"He was part of that family, and

now they've lost a part of their family, a goombah, a buddy," he said. "But at least we have shared his love and his laughter, but mostly his concern for others."

"We will all miss this special person's presence in our lives," Newlin said. "But his spirit and memory will always be with us."

Pozzani was buried at St. Stanislaus Cemetery in Coatesville.

Burke's funeral will be today at the Maclean-Chamberlain Funeral Home in Coatesville.