

The Beauty of a Grace Filled Death

Dear Parishioners,

I write to you from my family home in Niagara Falls where I am sadly preparing for the funeral of my dear mother who, after 88 years of life on this earth, passed peacefully away on August 24th. Certainly I am not the first to have lost a mother, and I understand the very personal nature of this event in one's life. But for a priest the experience has added layers of meaning that have effected me deeply, and which I would like to share with you.

Two Sundays ago following Mass at St. Anthony's I drove back home to visit my mother, expecting only a short visit of a few nights, not realizing she had crossed a silent threshold in her slow decline and that death was nigh. God in His goodness bestowed upon me the gift of being with her for the last three days of her wakefulness and the treasure of her last conversations. But by week's end I would be bidding my mother farewell forever.

Before she slipped into what became a quiet sleep of three days, and undoubtedly sensing the change within her, she told me that her time had come: soon she would go to God. Yet even in her frailty she was the mother and comforted her children with the assurance that she would love us even from Heaven. Our family's mournful vigil then ensued, and we gathered to envelop her with our continual presence and constant prayer, keeping watch lest the Evil One disturb her peace or she slip away unexpectedly and alone.

In the dawning hours of Saturday morning, a day dedicated to the Mother of God, as we slept scattered about the house, exhausted with anticipation, care and sorrow, my sisters who had been keeping the night watch summoned us to my mother's bedside, sensing that another pass had been taken toward the portal to the afterlife.

Donning my priestly stole and with my family gathered about, I administered the Last Rites of our Holy Church to my mother, granting sacramental Absolution and the Apostolic Pardon. I then offered Holy Mass at her bedside, giving her droplets of the Precious Blood as Viaticum. And for the next four hours we prayed the Rosary and Divine Mercy Chaplet, beseeching Our Lady's intercession and God's mercy.

Her room we had turned into a sort of chapel. A large crucifix hung over her bed, holding its proper place of honor. An image of Our Lady looked down upon her with tender, maternal eyes. And the great Saint Joseph, Patron of a Happy Death, stood by in statuesque and protective dignity, comforting us with the thought that in our final moments the Catholic has a most powerful advocate in him.

Sitting and kneeling about her death bed, competing for the precious space that allowed us to hold and kiss her hands or caress her face and hair, we began to sing songs glorifying God for the gift of her life and love for us.

She was so lovely and serene in those final moments. Elegant in dying as she was elegant in life, her head we tenderly wrapped a silken, flowered scarf which framed her face with poise and dignity. Her breathing was soft and mercifully showed no signs of the expected final agony.

About her neck she wore the Brown Scapular of Our Lady – a sign of her devotion to the Mother of the Redeemer - and a golden Miraculous Medal as a ward against the Devil's wiles. In one hand she held a Rosary, the Catholic's great lifelong weapon in spiritual warfare. And in the other I placed my purple confessional stole for her to present to Saint Peter in evidence that she came as the mother of a priest.

At last, as I sang the lilting lyrics of the hymn "Now at the Daylight's Ending," my dear mother gently breathed her last and gave up her spirit to her Creator.

My mother was considered a beautiful lady even in her final years. But I will tell you, dear parishioners, that it seemed as if the grace of the Sacraments shone forth from her in those last moments. Her countenance was not that of a dying woman, but rather of a sleeping woman whose soul was being ever filled with the gifts of supernatural life; as if invisible grace was made manifest as a final sign of God's love. It was a fleeting but unmistakable phenomenon, yet my heart thrilled to behold her in such a state, and I considered the promise of Our Blessed Lord that He would one day raise our bodies to be like His in glory.

A great grace has been given to me. In a sense this was the supreme moment in my priestly ministry: to bear to and present before those Heavenly Gates the one who had born me in her womb and brought me thence to the fount of Baptism where my own soul first tasted the sweetness of sanctifying grace.

To God be the glory, and the honor and the praise; now and forever.

- Father de Rosa