

Homily at Mom's Funeral Mass

Sacred Heart Church (Roslindale) – 4/19/04

Readings: Proverbs 31:10-30 (excerpt);
Colossians 3:12, 15-17; John 14:1-6

Thank you all for coming to join Mary Ellen, John, & me, as well as John's wife Ann, their son Larry & daughter Ellen, Ellen's husband Doug, & their children Alana & Julianne, for this funeral celebration of Mom's life. Larry's wife Hao-Chau joins us in spirit.

Mom would have been 95 on May 30th. Her life was long, fruitful, richly blessed, and full. She shared that life with her beloved husband George, whom she met in the 1920s, married in 1937, and sadly buried from this church in September 1965. George's memory remained fresh and vibrant in her heart through the ensuing 38 years of her widowhood.

She shared that life with us, her children & grandchildren & great grandchildren. She shared that life with her relatives, colleagues, students, neighbors, with many Jesuits and countless Sisters of Saint Joseph, with her fellow residents at Seton Residence in Wellesley Hills and the wonderful staff there – all her friends, you who are here today, many who have already died, many others who could not come today but are with us in Spirit.

All of us are truly *her Church*, joined with her today in celebration in this her familiar & favorite holy place, the place where she visited God so often, encountering Him at Mass, speaking to Him with her rosary & other prayers, finding healing in Confession & nourishment in Communion; this place where her three children were baptized, made First Communion, and were confirmed; this place where she so often enjoyed seeing John or me serving Mass in our far-off youth, where she delighted to attend Masses that I was able to celebrate here over the years, and where she asked us to bring her for burial.

For many years Mom's leg problems made it too difficult for her to climb the stairs to the upper church, and this lower church was her special spiritual home. In Mom's name, we welcome all of you to *her Church* for her final Mass here this morning.

As you can imagine, this hasn't been an easy homily to write, but the struggle to write has been a great grace for me. I've smiled a lot, and

I've dropped many more tears than I'd anticipated on the desktop in my borrowed room at BC and on the keyboard of my trusty laptop computer. I found I was writing not only a homily for this Mass but a precious final letter for Mom. Mary Ellen told me Mom looked forward to the occasional letters or cards I sent her from Jordan in recent years and often showed them to her visitors. I regret not having sent more!

Much of what I tried to write in these past few days, I had to cut out again, either because it was too private or just too wordy! But I know Mom read it all over my shoulder as I was struggling with it, and she's probably showing it around to Dad and her many friends in heaven. I certainly hope so!

Mom's life was human and filled with love and caring. Her life was human and afflicted with irksome physical limitation, frustration, and pain. Her life was human and marked by successes and failures, with hope and fear, with happiness and sorrow. Mom's life was God's special gift and a big challenge.

Both her parents had died before she was out of her teens, her father of illness and her mother from a blood clot after being struck by a car. Those tragedies were also a blessing in disguise, because they brought her from the remote Brockton of her childhood to the home of cousins on Grampian Way in Boston's Savin Hill district, where she continued school and soon fell hopelessly in love with a neighborhood boy she first noticed on the local tennis courts. She never looked back! George O'Connell was her first and lasting love, and she was his.

In the interests of time, and using a familiar rhetorical technique that I learned at BC High, I will pass over in silence their many years of courtship during college and through the long years after the Great Depression. Finally Dad received a teaching appointment at the Washington Irving School down the hill here, and they were married at St. William's in Dorchester at the end of the school year in 1937. Mom had to stop her teaching at Girls High then, because pre-War Boston didn't permit married women to work full-time in the classroom! How far we've come since then!

Mom and Dad got by on a teacher's salary and raised their family within walking distance of Dad's school, first in an apartment rented at 195

Poplar Street and finally in the small home they bought at 46 Sycamore Street when I was a sophomore at BC High. Their depression-induced caution about such a major investment meant that a lot of money had flowed out in rent, without any equity to show in return.

I don't think we kids realized how close to the line our family's finances were during the War and in the years just after. Dad's job was secure, however, and Mom kept us fed and clothed, and they both sheltered us from the worries they must have shared.

Mom's abiding love for Dad was a steady beacon in her life and ours. She never stopped missing him after his sudden death in the aftermath of the turmoil and confusion surrounding school integration and "Operation Exodus". Dad was a principal by then, in the Parkman District in Forest Hills, and his gentle and persistent leadership helped calm the crisis, but the consequent tensions and personal strains brought on the massive heart attack that snatched him from Mom and from us. Now she is finally with him again!

Mom loved to say she was "proud of all my children" – especially when someone would offer words of praise or compliments about the accomplishments of only one or other of us. In later years, she became equally proud of her two talented and handsome grandchildren, Ellen and Larry, and she looked forward to their visits and news of their accomplishments. She was delighted with their marriages, Ellen's which she had been able to attend, and Larry's last August, which she had to glimpse from afar, and she welcomed Ellen's Doug, their daughters Alana and Julianne, and Larry's Hao-Chau into the widening circle of her family. All their pictures had prominent places on the small shelves of her room at Seton!

Mom's home was here in Roslindale, but increasing problems with her leg eventually brought her to Elizabeth Seton Residence. She lived there for more than six years. It is a wonderful place, combining the religious vision of the Sisters of Charity of Halifax with a very fine physical layout and a dedicated and devoted staff.

Eventually she came to be relatively "at home" and increasingly at peace with herself there. I am sure I speak for John and Mary Ellen and all our family when I say that we owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the staff of ESR for their care

and patience and understanding and love for Mom and the other residents there. They work hard to foster a sense of community among the residents, and their efforts are very successful. Our family and Mom were very fortunate to find them in our time of need!

Mom had a long life, a full life, a good life, a devout life, a graced life — not a perfect life, as she would be quick to say — but a life in which God was palpably present, active, recognized, acknowledged, and welcomed. Who could possibly ask for more!

Mom's health had been deteriorating for some months, and the pace picked up considerably in the last weeks. Last weekend she fell into a deep sleep that soon became a coma. Tests revealed successive problems, and suddenly we knew the end might be near. Even so, death came quickly to Mom, and unexpectedly to us, last Thursday night and early Friday morning. Even though Mary Ellen had been keeping me informed about Mom's condition, and I was already arranging to return from Jordan last Saturday, her phone call early Friday morning was a total shock!

Since the earliest available flight from Amman was early on Saturday, I was able to offer my regular Friday noon parish Mass for her before I packed and left. That congregation is mainly Filipino domestic workers in Jordan who only get time off on Fridays, and the church was full. I baptized a tiny Filipino baby at the Mass, and I was deeply consoled by the thought that Mom would have liked it that the first Mass celebrating her life would also be welcoming the new life of a little baby girl into the Church.

I told the Filipino congregation a bit about Mom after the baptism, and they joined me in praying for her. They and the other members of my parish in Amman are with us here in Spirit today, too.

I had a lot more I wanted to say to you about Mom this morning, but you probably know much of it from your own experiences with her over the years. Besides, we still have the rest of the Mass and our final farewells at the cemetery. Thanks again for coming to be with us today.

Good by, Mom. Say hello to Dad for me, for all of us. And keep up your prayers for us – the prayers I know you've already started. Without them, I could never have finished this homily!

Please stand for the Prayer of the Faithful.