

January 21, 2010

I remember when Mother Theresa died, whose sisters I have worked closely with for many years in Haiti, and I offered condolences to Sister Magda. Sister was from Spain and was a sister and a doctor, and I said to her in Spanish the expression of sympathy, “comparto tu sentimiento.” Literally that means, “I share your feeling”. She said to me immediately, “If you share my feeling, you are sharing my joy.”

I thought the response to be very odd, but today I fully understand it, many years later. That death brings sadness is obvious. Not too much to reflect on there. Sadness is because of love. Taking the sadness out of death means taking the love out of life.

But is not so obvious why death is the occasion for joy and it’s worth our thinking about.

My mother was diagnosed with cancer about 8 months ago. Over these months she had time to think about her life and death, about all those she loved, and about her God. With the care of the best physicians and nurses, with the full devotion of her husband and children, she met the end of her life in a beautiful way. Slowly dying during mass at her bedside, dying shortly after my sermon on the merciful presence of the Blessed Mother who is with us “now and at the hour of our death”, she died during the consecration of the sacred bread and wine. I later asked my father, since mom died so soon after my talk, if he thought my words were lethal, and did mom in! He replied quickly, “your sermon darn near killed us all.”

Do you see all my friends from Haiti, here at mass? They arrived yesterday. For the last 6 days they have been digging the living and the dead out of the rubble. Digging with picks, shovels, knives, forks and their bare hands. They have buried the dead and bandaged the wounded. Digging out the wounded Dr Castro, the wounded Erin Kloos, the lifeless Molly Hightower, the lifeless Ryan Kloos. They pause from their heroic work to come and honor my mother today, and I am so grateful to them.

Imagine, the earthquake caused the death of 100,000 to the present count. The death of these people was so different from the death of my mother. Instead of 8 months to prepare, they had 34 seconds. Instead of constant attention and affection from loving families and skilled doctors, buildings fell on them, trapped them, crushed them and isolated them. Instead of being honored with a beautiful coffin, the precious white pall, the wonderful incense, they bloat and rot and make you turn your head and vomit. Instead of being laid tenderly in the grave as we will do to my mother today, they are lifted from the street by backhoes and front end loaders and dumped into huge trucks, arms and legs hanging over the sides like too many rotten crabs in a bucket. It is so different, so tragic, sad beyond words. Life has to end for everyone. But the way that life ended for Gerri Frechette is a cause of thanksgiving and joy, and our gratitude should make our hearts burst with zeal, to want to right the wrong for those whose death is a humiliation and a disgrace.

On January 6th as I came home from Haiti to stay with mom to the end, the Archbishop of Port au Prince, Joseph Serge Miot, asked me to let him know when mom died. He wanted to come and officiate at her funeral. On January 12th, just 6 days later, he was

dead. Within 34 seconds the earthquake threw him from his 3rd floor balcony to the patio below, and the chancery fell on top of him, and the cathedral fell on top of the chancery. I tell you this for two reasons. First, to remember and pray for this kind pastor and bishop during this mass. And second, as an example of a simple reality. Did he ever expect to be dead before my dying mother? What are your expectations of your death? How secure are you sitting here at the funeral? Will you still be here in 6 days? Or maybe will you also be gone, with 34 seconds to prepare?

The point is a simple one. We cannot escape death. We should learn everything we can about it. This mass, this earthquake, should be a profound school of learning for us. To die the right way we have to know the right way to live. Right living is the preparation for right dying – even a death that comes in 34 seconds.

I asked my mother many times why she didn't seem afraid to die. She told me she had a long and full life. She was very satisfied. I have noticed over many years of priesthood that people who feel empty are often very afraid of death, and people who feel they have lived a full life are not. And what is the right fullness? Dedication and love for other people, building up our life together, with each other and for each other, cementing our bonds with the only things that can last: faith, hope and love.

On another night, my mother told me her faith was her guarantee, her promise, her anchor. Mom's faith was lived out without trumpet blasts, but visible for all these long years. She brought us to benediction before we could even spell it, to mass before we could see over the pew in front of us. Her whole life long she knew the essential place of faith in God, and tried to help us see it as well.

Mom told me on yet another occasion that she saw an angel twice in her life. I asked her if both times were at parties, especially toward the end of the night!. She told me that the second time was after her diagnosis, while laying awake at night worrying about how dad and the rest of us would do after she died. A firm hand held her shoulder, and a gentle voice in her ear, told her to trust in "the peace that is beyond all understanding", and assured her that God would bring all things to a good end.

Do you believe in angels? Do you understand the deepest things about mystery? Filling our eyes with video games and our ears with ipods might leave us poorer than we can possibly imagine.

After my mother died, seeing dad so forlorn, I asked her for a sign. Since the day was rainy and warm, and mom knew I like cold and snow, I asked to see snow. The following morning, on a cold and sunny day, the snow fell in Old Wethersfield Connecticut from 8 a.m. to 9:15 a.m.

Why did I tell you this? Do I think the dead control the weather?

No, I tell you this so we wake up to the truth that life is governed by mystery and not by meteorologists, and the mystery is of a loving God, and God's loving involvement with us. History shows over and over again that our own interpretation of each other, and of the world, leads to disasters and wars and poverty. Rather than locking ourselves into

stunted interpretations of people and life, and then to acting on them in such a way that we generate wars, sickness, ignorance and poverty – we should learn to be coherent servants of mystery. God’s idea of us, of who we are and what we are capable of, in short God’s dream for us, gives life, life fully and life unto eternity.

I complained to God, in my own prayers, that even though mom had 8 wonderful months (neither her disease nor the toxic treatments, nor the knowledge of her disease ever moved her away from her confident and peaceful demeanor). I complained that her last 3 weeks were too tough and not fair. And in my prayer I heard a response. Did I want to cheat mom of her victory? I was given to understand that the last agony represents all the agonies of a lifetime – every struggle to work, to raise us, to get us through school. Every battle she fought against sickness in of any one of us, against our own adolescent rejection of principles she was trying to instill - all of the struggles of her life were present in this last struggle, for her own salvation, and to show us, to show God, and to show herself what she was really made of. The fruit of this last agony is to victoriously break away from this life and into God’s splendor. No, I could never want to cheat mom from this victory.

My mother and father taught us all to live our lives as good and generous people. They weren’t perfect. Just like us they were half clay and half God-breath. They didn’t always get it right the first time. Mom had a problem that took her nearly 20 years to conquer. But she did. It is not our individual acts that show us who we are, but the long trajectory, the trail of light that we leave behind. Mom and dad taught us to be joyful, to be strong, to work hard, to stick together, and to seek God and trust Him. Dad taught us how to be faithful, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, to the very end. Mom taught us how to face sickness and death with courage, faith and dignity.

Finally, mom also told me that she was so blessed never to have had to face the nightmare of every parent, the death of one of her own children. In fact, most of us are well the age of grandparents. So, she said to me, that now God will give her the chance to be a mother twice. She brought us into this world and she will do everything in her power to bring us into the next.

And so, there she went. Deeper & deeper into darkness, seeing the more and brighter stars that only total darkness can reveal, until one star gets bigger and bigger, brighter and brighter and raises in front of her with full beckon. Dawn. Coming home. Returning to the mystery out of which she came, 79 years ago. Birth and death-, the bookends of life, the portals of mystery, which mark the span of our years.

Yes, please do share our sadness. But don’t miss the chance to also share our joy. Let us together praise and thank God our maker, Christ our Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit who consoles us, who have claimed Gerri as fully their own, and yet still more ours than ever before

Fr Rick, C.P.