

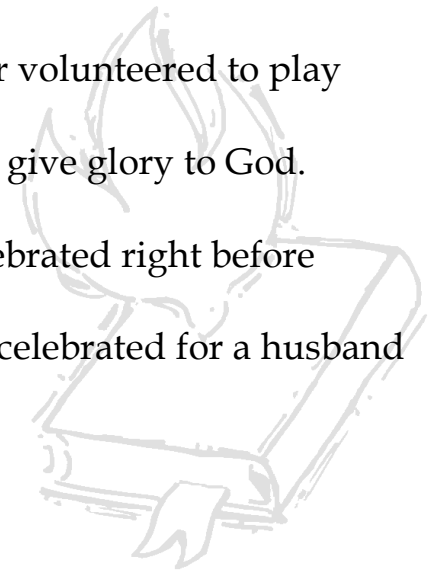
Homily
Solemnity of Mary - B

Rev. Peter G. Jankowski
January 01, 2022

Nm 6: 22-27
Ps 67: 2-3, 5, 6, 8
Gal 4: 4-7
Lk 2: 16-21

Just before Christmas, there were a whole slew of individuals who had asked for prayers and anointings and funerals that we celebrated. A mother in Kankakee named Joanne was suffering from lymphoma. A woman named Laura from Momence, IL was diagnosed with an inoperable cyst growing in her neck and actively was dying. A gentleman named José tragically took his life a week before Christmas; we celebrated his funeral Mass a few days later and then, on Christmas Eve, we celebrated a Memorial Mass in Spanish at St. Anne's (where more faithful attended that Mass than any of our liturgies on Christmas Day!). We invited the faithful from St. Anne's to attend that Mass and two members of our St. Patrick's Hispanic choir volunteered to play music at that Memorial Mass not for pay but to give glory to God.

I was also thinking about two funerals. I celebrated right before Christmas, over in Momence. One funeral was celebrated for a husband



named Alfred Hart and the other for a mother named Carol Preston. In both cases, Al and Carol very much were invested in their marriages and served as role models in their families (Carol for over fifty years, Al for over seventy!). Al died at the age of ninety; Carol's husband Rick served as principal of St Patrick's academy for a good period, towards the end of the Academy's existence.

I was thinking about both funerals and how both sets a couple reflected their love for each other. Normally what happens is when I celebrate a funeral, I ask families to offer stories about the life of their loved ones who have passed. With those stories, I try to connect these lives with the gospel message. Just as importantly, I try to look at what these individuals have offered from the world of faith and pray and hope that I can learn something from those stories so that I can get a better priest.

In the case of Al and his wife Joyce... they had a remarkably interesting relationship, as both shared a very "unique" sense of humor - very caustic and very ironic. Joyce's family told me that when Al

would bring her just a few roses for their anniversary (as they did not have much money at the time), Joyce would often say that Al was only buying a rose for every good year of their marriage. Joyce said that Al died before Christmas because he did not want to buy her a Christmas present - caustic and ironic this marriage was.

Yet, on the day of this particular funeral, Joyce told me that Al's loss felt like she had a hole in her heart. She very much missed her husband and missed his love and that "unique" sense of humor. At that time, the person who was decorating St Patrick's for Christmas, had decorated the church with beautiful poinsettias and a whole bunch of lights on our sanctuary trees and wreaths. The church absolutely looks spectacular in preparation for the Christmas Season. With this beautifully decorated Church, I had to preach on my knees in front of Joyce, since she was hard of hearing and her daughter had to yell everything I was saying in her mother's ear.

I preached directly to Al's wife Joyce and said to her, "You told me how much Al meant to you in life and how important he was. You

kidded about how the few roses he gave you represented to few good years in your marriage. I told Joyce that, in reality, she very much knew that her life with Al was truly blessed and that every poinsettia leaf in the sanctuary represented every good year of their marriage and that every light on every tree and represented a joyful, loving moment between a husband and a wife. I honestly believed what I preached – after listening to what the children said about their father and mother and how Al and Joyce doted over their kids, grandkids and great-grandkids, and certainly his wife, I learned that Al very much dedicated his life to taking care of his family.

Concerning Carol Preston... husband. Rick was telling me how the two of them went to school together and how they met in their local band. Both were percussionists in school; Rick was associated more with the snare drum and Carol was more a base drum. Rick said that Carol played the bass drum because she was one of the few people in the band that could keep a beat.

At the funeral Mass, I likened Carol to Ringo Starr, Roger Taylor and Charlie Watts, three individuals whose drum prowess was exceedingly good, but were overshadowed by other members of the bands in which they played. Concerning Charlie Watts from the Rolling Stones, when other critics would evaluate him, they would say that he was not flashy but he kept the band at a steady pace. I learned that Charlie Watts was a jazz percussionist by trade but he was asked to play in this rock band because he could keep a beat and keep the members of the group in balance, so the other members could shine. Charlie Watts was always in the background of a group but was considered necessary and essential for what the band was playing.

I thought about this image in relation to Carol Preston. In the role as a mom, Carol's family referenced her as "pleasantly assertive." In her discussions with me, Carol had planned every step of her funeral liturgy. Carol met with me about a month or two before she died and chose her readings, her sons and even planned her own funeral reception. Carol insisted that her reception would consist of Olive

Garden Italian food as well as Polish sausage – a great combination, right? When the family could not find Polish sausage at a local deli, I ended up driving over to Kankakee to one of the local stores there and grilled some Polish sausage myself on Carol’s behalf. I then asked Maria Jankowski from my family to make her homemade sauerkraut to go with the sausage. I ended up grilling Polish sausage for them. I then asked Maria Jankowski to make some sauerkraut for the Polish sausage, which Maria laced with enough meat that I did not need to buy the sausage as well.

I was told that Carol “kept the beat” for this family – she did not necessarily take front stage visibly in the Preston family but her presence was felt in the background in everything the Prestons did. I even found out that Rick put out the Christmas decorations at the house during Carol’s last weeks so that his wife to enjoy one last Christmas with the family – what a testimony of faith from a husband that genuinely loved his wife.

Sometimes when I preach these homilies, I often use these types of metaphors and modern-day situations to illustrate the gospel message. Sometimes people might wonder why I am not talking more theologically or why I am taking a more story-oriented route in preaching the scriptures. In my reflection, I offer these stories as the basis for my homilies because this method is what the Lord used in the first century. Jesus Christ used common examples and illustrations of the lives of people that he served and tried to explain how the kingdom of God persevered in his age (and ours). When you encounter anecdotes that illustrate the gospel message, those images stick with the heart of the believer and the believer holds on to the message in a more profound way, at least in my experience.

On the Solemnity of Mary, I think about parents like Carol who provided “the steady beat” for her husband and family, how Al allowed the light of God to shine upon his wife and children like the lights of a Christmas tree. What Carol and Al illustrated were the type of lives a parent is supposed to live – to love, to serve and often to grieve.

I keep going back to that example of the 90-year-old great grandmother I encountered in Phoenix, AZ who chided her 70-year-old son that he had put on a coat when he went outside, because moms are always moms no matter what the age and dads are always dads. To be a good Christian parent is to allow God's love to work through the parent in taking care of the children and family.

Today we celebrate the life of a mother who was gifted with this presence of God in her life, a real presence of God that was placed in her care. We recall how Mary was the first nativity, the first tabernacle of the New Testament. As a mother, she accepted this life from God; she allowed the power of the Holy Spirit to fill her womb so that she could give birth to the savior of the world.

In the scriptures, we learned how she raised him and loved him. We read how this mother grieved for her son and throughout the entire process, she lived without sin. We are taught in the faith when it was time for this mother to leave this world, she was assumed body and soul into heaven.

On this day, we celebrate this Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God, the *Theotokos* (the God-bearer), this woman gave herself so much to her son in a sign of motherhood that Mary serves the greatest saint that we have in the history of our martyrology.

So on this holy day, I give thanks to the moms and dads who have given their lives for the sake of others. We pray for those who struggle in their journey as parents. We certainly pray for the family of José Guerrero, who lost his way but is trying to find it on the other side of life. Please keep praying for those who are lost and supporting those who are with us. We keep asking our moms and dads to be good pillars of the faith, as the primary educators of their children through their word and deed.

Let us keep praying for mom and dads as we offer this song, this hymn, that priests, religious and many lay men and women sing before going to bed at night. I offered this hymn at the funerals of Carol Preston, Al Hart and José Guerrero and for all parents who dedicate their lives in taking care of their children...

*Salve, Regina, Mater misericordiæ,
vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve.
Ad te clamamus exsules filii Hevæ,
Ad te suspiramus, gementes et flentes
in hac lacrimarum valle.
Eia, ergo, advocata nostra, illos tuos
misericordes oculos ad nos converte;
Et Jesum, benedictum fructum ventris tui,
nobis post hoc exsilium ostende.
O clemens, O pia, O dulcis Virgo Maria.*

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of our death. Amen.

This is our prayer.