

Companions on the Journey

May 9, 2021

Dear Friends,

At funerals it is not uncommon to hear someone say that “She did not have an easy life.” That is a kind of code, it seems to me. The speaker gives praise to the truth of the deceased person’s steadfastness and perseverance in faith even as it includes the truth that at times she was a difficult person to know and love. Such a statement often indicates the complexity of the person who has died and the various layers or level of interaction that life places before us all the time.

My own mother died on the 24th of July in 2008. Some of you will remember that she lived in the old Rectory on the second floor down the hall from her son for more than five years. I remember being asked how I got permission to move her into the Rectory. Permission? I was supposed to get permission? As the Lord is my witness, the thought never crossed my mind. I know the diocese had no problem believing that statement when they heard what I had done. There were four children in our family. All were working. Three boys and the oldest, my sister, worked down at HUP (The Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania) while living in Horsham. She was on the road by 6AM each day and home by 630 or so. My mom could have lived there but would have been alone all day. My brothers and their spouses also worked all day. I worked all day too but in the Rectory. We had the room and it made sense to me to bring her in to live in the Rectory.

Most parishioners who spoke to me thought it was great and for a few years she was a fixture at Sunday Mass until her health failed. There were a few who told me that they thought it inappropriate for me to have done this and that my responsibility was to be their pastor first and foremost, having left my family to serve here in the ministry. I must say that that thought also had never crossed my mind. There were some necessary adjustments all around. My mother had to let go of the thought that she had moved into the rectory TO HELP HER SON RUN THE PARISH! Also, she felt very, very comfortable telling various staff members what they were doing wrong and where they needed to step up their game to better serve her son, the pastor.

But we weathered all these little storms and eventually she settled into her home. One of the most touching things she ever said to me was this, “Thank you Stephen for opening your home to me. I feel very safe here.” All her life my mother was a strong and feisty woman of faith but because she grew up in an alcoholic household and there were responsibilities placed upon her at a way-too-early-age, she never felt safe throughout her life. Close relationships were not easy for her. The sword always hung over her head—the sword of unexpected loss, the sword of broken relationships, the sword of dashed hopes and abandoned dreams.

I did not always know all that. And I was probably a few of the reason why she felt unsafe or uncertain. But in the end she found a true haven and quiet waters and the feeling of being safe began to grow in her. At the end she was not afraid to go to God even though for a long time she had been. The Lord gives us all the amount of time we need to get there—some more, some less. The Lord also gives us our mothers. They deserve our love and respect and our prayers even if they were not able to be all for us that they desired to be in their hearts or even if they were truly saintly and loving women. There is a place for us. A place for all of us. A place for each of us. A place for our mothers. Let us commend them into the hands of our loving Father on this Mother’s Day.

In the Peace of Christ,

Msgr. McHenry