

MOTHER'S DAY—A FUNERAL HOMILY

My own mother died on July 24th 2008. Here is part of what I preached as her funeral homily. I present it to you on this Mother's Day weekend.

The woman we bury today was a believer in Jesus Christ and him crucified and risen from the tomb. She was a woman of prayer, faithful and loving. But her brand of love was neither romantic nor overly naïve. It was decidedly practical. And it seems no accident to me that this woman, named Geraldine, whom we lay to rest is prayed for on the feast of St. Martha who was busy with the demands of hospitality. My mother always thought Jesus was wrong in cautioning Martha like that. My mother had come to know firsthand that "love in action is oft a harsh and dreadful thing." But that never stopped her. She was brave but did not believe herself to be so.

It was five years ago in May that she moved into Saint Anthony's. She had fallen and broken her pelvis a couple of times and was going to be moved into Assisted Living in her Retirement Community. The family and I thought that moving her here a better choice. When my mom first came to live here at Saint Anthony's there was a period of adjustment that she had to go through. I had to go through that too—and so too did the staff. I did have to sit down with her and remind her that I had been pastor of the parish for a dozen years before she moved in and really did not need her assistance in telling the staff what their jobs were. Basically, I had to tell her to "knock it off, Mom." That's pretty direct but she could handle direct. She was good at direct. A few vignettes:

I went into her sitting room one Sunday afternoon, plopped on the sofa and said, "I'm tired." She looked up at me and said, "I'm tired just being related to you."

Once when she was feeling particularly frustrated with her condition of advanced age she said, "Stephen, I can't go on like this." In order to placate her I said, "Mom, do you know what I say to people when they ask me about you?" "That that old lady upstairs yelling is my mother?"

One Good Friday my brother Mike stopped over after devotions to catch Confession. After we visited a bit I suggested we go down to mom's room to say goodnight knowing she had just gotten into bed a little bit earlier. I went into her room and stood at the foot of her bed with my brother off to the side. I said, "Mom, look who I brought with me." Without looking, she said, "Oh Stephen, I can't believe you brought one of your priest friends right into my bedroom." Whereupon my brother moved to the foot of the bed and said, "Hey Mom, if it's any consolation, I didn't recognize you either."

One night after getting her into bed and noticing that her nose was running I handed her a Kleenex and said, "Is that a cold, Mom?" "No—aggravation."

The next night I was again kneeling beside her bed I asked, "Is there anything you need, Mom, anything you want?" "I want to hit you in the head with a hammer."

She could be very direct.

In our family growing up there was a lot of love but there was not a lot of showing of affection. About the most affection I ever saw is captured in the picture on the back of the programs. I would kiss her hello and goodbye because that was expected. But as I grew older and had more experience with life and was on both the giving and receiving end of people's love and their expressions of love, I decided that being able to tell someone I loved them was better than not being able to. And so from the day my mom moved into the rectory each night as I went into her room to wish her a good night I would say, "I love you, Mom." Each night she would respond by saying, "Good night, Stephen."

But with the persistence that I got from her I never let up. Every night, "I love you." Every night, "Good night." Then, after about six months, she began to add a sentence. "Good night Stephen. Thank you for everything you do for me." I remember thinking to myself. "Well, that's Mom's way of saying 'I love you.' it's just hard for her to say those words.

I continued for another six months until one night I said, "Good night, Mom, I love you." She responded "Good night, Stephen, mnpflkq." I said, "Excuse me. What was that last thing you said?" In a little voice, "I love you." Breakthrough. From then on she became more comfortable saying "I love you." It was not at all that she was lacking in love or unfamiliar with love. It was the articulation. It really threw her. But there she was, at the age of 89 learning how to tell other people, "I love you." And she did and then she said it a lot. It was the very last thing she said to me before she died.

The battleground in the arena of human living is the human heart, yours and mine—and Geraldine's. She knew how to love and to give love and to act in loving service. She struggled with the expressing of love and with the receiving of love. But she came full circle here. At the end she could accept with gratitude all that we gave to her. She learned how to surrender, to turn over her heart to the God who is love. In the end she became like a sacrament, the reality of God's love expressed in deed and in word. In her brokenness at the end she was Eucharist and somehow in her dying we who gathered around her bed were fed and nourished.

We are to become Eucharist for each other in this life, feeding those around us with the love of our hearts. My mother taught us all very well what love looks like—and then you taught me how to express it—and then I taught her. And so it goes!

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.