

DECEMBER 2008

# homiletic & pastoral review

A detailed job description  
for the parish bookkeeper  
By Jerry J. Pokorsky

Reclaiming silence  
for holiness  
By Daniel J. Heisey

The culture war:  
Fighting the  
contraceptive mentality  
By Richard Bastien

Priests and the  
importance  
of fatherhood  
By Paul C. Vitz and Daniel C. Vitz

*"I suspect that for many religious, there is an exceptional closeness with the last parent, since we have no spouse."*

## On losing the last parent

*By John Fisher*

■ In my sophomore year of high school, my father was hospitalized for what I believe was a heart attack. For the first time, I was faced with the fragility of life and the possibility that something might happen to one of my parents. There were times when I wondered what life would be like without one of them. My father died at the young age of 59 when I was in college. Immediately, I asked myself why I wasted time wondering what life would be like without one of them rather than celebrating life with both of them. I made a silent vow that I would not anticipate life without my mother here on earth. For twenty-six years I was faithful to that promise. Now, I am not asking what life would be like without her, I am living that reality and it is brutally painful.

With my father's death, I probably made another promise that I did not vocalize but indeed internalized as well as externalized.

I am certain that I set to honor my father by somehow loving my mother twice as much. I would have no regrets. One of the first manifestations of this was that I would never have a leave-taking without saying, "I love you." What I need to know now is: when do I stop reaching for the phone for the nightly call that would end with those three wonderful and telling words? When do I stop regretting that she is not physically here to witness one nephew's graduation award, another's college playing opportunities or that niece's accomplishments? When do I forget that she is dead? When do I stop crying? When does the hurt begin to ease? When do I let go of the routine? Why do I long nightly to check up on her, to ask for a quick run-down of her day, her volunteering, what game she was watching, how my siblings and our shared passion—the grandkids—were doing? I miss not asking what she had for din-

ner, what's new, whether she needs anything, and telling her I will see her on Sunday, our day together. Suddenly, I hate Sundays!

### The bond

I am not foolish or insensitive to insinuate that my brother, four sisters, or the twelve grandchildren do not sense this incredible loss and "unfillable" void to the degree that I do. However, as a religious and a priest, I think there is something *different* experienced when the last parent dies. Married siblings have their spouses and children. Since my father's death, my mother and I have done almost everything together. I never had to decide where the holidays would be celebrated as mom took care of that. Within my family, I gained a new identity. One niece would inquire if "Grandmom and Uncle John" were coming for dinner while another nephew would ask if "John and grandmom" were coming to his game. If "we" were not together with our natural family, "we" were together with our religious (Oblate) family, although the identity changed to "Mary and John."

In our shared social life, there were many car rides together to or from a sibling's house or a grandkid's game, where mom reiterated how proud she was of her children, how well they were doing, how devoted they were to their children and what great, beautiful grandchildren she had, and where she ultimately questioned how she deserved such great children. She was our best cheerleader. There wasn't anything we could not do. A brother-in-law expressed this well by saying that her acceptance and belief in her family was so complete and persistent that we began to believe it! We entertained the idea that maybe this granddaughter could play at the university level or Carnegie Hall, or this grandson could star in the NBA. There was also a special laxness for the grandchildren. More importantly, we were constantly held with tender love in her thoughts and prayers,



especially if one needed a special intention answered or favor granted.

Mom was completely biased when it came to me. To her, no priest, no Oblate worked harder than I (though my friends were a close second). On one occasion, one of my sisters was sharing her day with her, noting that she had three overdosed patients in the ER, four stroke victims, a few more in triage, and had to work a "double." Mom's response to this litany of woes was, "Our John had to say two Masses and host an open house at his school." The family got used to such a reply and would have been disappointed had they not heard it. They, too, sensed the "specialness" of the "mother-and-son-who-is-a-priest" bond. They entered fully into the "we" relationship and welcomed "us" into their homes and shared their most precious gift with us, their children. They appreciated knowing with whom mom would be on most Sundays, their brother or their extended "Oblate brothers" and their parents. They keenly knew that the bond was special, for it was mom who fostered the vocations (priesthood, parenting), raised us in the faith, first taught us to sign ourselves, and showed us more clearly than anyone what God looked like, how God forgives and forgets, who God is for us, by word and more powerfully, by

example. Her fidelity as a wife and mother, the integrity with which she lived daily, her attention to prayer and her undying trust in the Blessed Mother nurtured all of our vocations and laid the groundwork for our living them with incredible passion.

For the religious, the remaining parent is the last visible sign of our direct line, our lifeblood, the one who gave us life and the one family member above all others with whom we consistently shared this life and traits. I suspect that for many religious, there is an exceptional closeness with the last parent, since we have no spouse. My mom was the one who would not, who could not forget a birthday, a feast day, and an anniversary day. She was the one with whom I shared most intimately my religious life. She was the one with whom I shared consistently the important and the mundane. She heard of each minor detail and accomplishment, knowing they were each special and precious. She journeyed with me and was warmly invited into every new community and every new ministry. In this, she was blessed to meet very special people (even one like her) who became dear friends and with whom she shared lasting memories. She, in turn, touched and graced their lives and communities. Mom was the one who listened to all the stories. She was the one with whom I could simply be "son." I could be myself, loving and moody! For forty-eight years I had no longer, more enduring and endearing relationship than this cherished, unbreakable one. As I often remark of parents, she raised me up and never let me down. She was my center, my calendar setter, my social life, my unconditional supporter, my moral compass, my lasting authority figure, my dearest friend and my banker. I rarely left her company without some money being placed in my hand. When I would turn around and give it to the grandkids they would say with voice inflected, "More grandmom money?" Mom

always asked who was going to take care of me when she was gone. The day following her burial, when alone in her bedroom going through some personal files, I came upon a CD that, unknown to me, she had taken in my name. It was for a generous amount. More profoundly, it matured the day she died! Coincidental? No. After the uncontrollable tears (then, and as I now write), I imagined her saying to me, "I told you I would take care of you." This is not chance. This is the work of God and his most special gift to me. Yes, mom and dad are still taking care of my family and me, but this time in deeper and more profound ways, for they have total access to their loving Creator, to whom they can intercede on our behalf.

#### **Mom and the paschal mystery**

Spirituality is about our participation in the paschal mystery, the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Christ. My mom participated well in the paschal mystery on earth. Her spirituality of wife and mother was a celebration of the life of Christ. The sacraments increased her faith, which in turn nourished us. Her devotional piety (the rosary, her novenas, prayers for nurses and priests, little retreats and pilgrimages) was the means through which she prayed for the intentions of her children, grandchildren and friends. She had clearly defined rules that were to be followed: attend Mass, honor your parents, obey the sisters, priests and teachers, and respect others. Her miraculous medal was the last thing we removed from her in the hospital. Mom read and heard the Gospels thoroughly. Her living of them allowed her to hand down to us the virtues contained in them. Though mom never considered herself "old" enough to sit in the first pew with the other elderly, her debilitating illness and infirmity won her a seat there, with my brother dutifully accompanying her. Her belief system, grounded in the love of

God and his mother, was unwavering. Her fidelity to this sustained her, especially in her suffering.

My mom's first participation in the suffering implicit in the paschal mystery was probably the loss of her spouse at a young age, as well as a granddaughter at five months and a grandson after six days. Her gentle embrace of being a widow was a quiet struggle. My parents' love defined the sacrament of marriage as two becoming one. With my father's death, she lost half of her self. So great was this void that it could never be filled (nor should it have been) by her children and grandchildren. Mom had tremendous empathy and taught us to be similarly compassionate. She had an incredible concern for the plight and pain of others. She entered into their struggle, listened to their stories and entrusted them to God through prayer, imploring me to do likewise.

Her willing acceptance of her three-month illness was a clear participation in the cross of her loving Savior. Indeed she "filled up what was missing in the cross" by her quiet suffering when beset with eight compressed disks in her back, one on top of the other. She spent three long months in several hospitals and a rehabilitation center. This time allowed us the opportunity to minister to her so completely and lovingly. What a great gift and blessing this was. We took her home on Mother's Day. Four days later, on the Feast of the Ascension, she was unresponsive. It was as if her spirit and will ascended to God resigned to his holy will and good pleasure. We kept vigil for three days, celebrating Mass around her bedside Saturday evening with mom presiding in her own special way. At the conclusion of the liturgy each child and grandchild anointed her, thanking her for being the presence of Christ for us, and giving her permission to let go while we prayed for acceptance. She died early the next day on what we might call her

"resurrection Sunday." Through the mercy of God, she now has embraced her new and eternal life with her God. Indeed her life *has* changed in new and wonderful ways.

Any death, especially that of a loved one, calls us to question our acceptance and our willingness to enter into the paschal mystery. Mom's death heightens for us the stark reality that we no longer have her on earth. Never again can we physically see her gentle face, hold her precariously in our arms, verbalize our sincere affection for her and listen to her gentle guidance and words of comfort as we did throughout our whole lives. Her death in this life, birth in the next and eternal life points to our future and our promise.

#### **The meaning: The challenge and what lies ahead**

My mom's life has indeed changed and not ended. So, too, for my family and me, our lives have changed, not ended. We are called to live the belief of this resurrection as we live without our mother on this earth. We find ourselves "orphaned" but with a new life given to us. Our mom's death has given us a "changed" life. It can be a birth for us if we open ourselves to the challenge of life without our loved one and the meaning her memory can bring. She inspires us to lead new and qualitatively more meaningful, more purposeful lives.

While I was intent on loving my mom twice as well after my father's death, now I find myself praying to both mom *and* dad. I pray to them to continue watching out for us, their children and grandchildren, that we may stay close, be kept out of harm's way, be healthy and be faithful to the good lessons they taught us. Certainly, they are in a position to intercede for us. The memory and example of their lives continue to exhort us to live well each day. Their intercession is with us in the difficult moments. The death of a loved one opens us to new movements of God's love. It

allows us to accept new changes, such as my brother and I ending our phone conversations mutually expressing our love for each other. I find myself cherishing the fragility of life in ways more precious than ever. I am keeping things in perspective, concerning myself with how I can grow in being loved by God and loving those with whom I come into contact, striving to recognize the presence of God within them. The flow of God's new movement calls me to intensify my energies where I am most passionate. This takes various forms, from living the vowed life with renewed intensity, to studying and preparing for lectures with passionate planning. It has given me a greater desire to live with the most special aspect of who I am, my cherished life as an uncle. This unique relationship allows me to dote on and pray for each nephew and niece by name, championing their causes and making clear to them the beautiful images of God that they are.

It is not so important to know the flow of God's new movement as it is to will what God wants and to trust in God's plan. We ask our loved ones who are now part of the communion of saints to provide for us. To the parents who spent their lives proud of us, we return the favor by honoring their

memory and example, striving harder to love delicately, to forgive completely, to give generously, to pray faithfully, to work diligently and to live gently.

Many memories come to the fore after the death of a parent. Recently, I recalled asking my mom if she was ready to walk me to kindergarten for my second day. She responded, "I showed you the way, now go on." Perhaps with mom's death I have to accept her pushing me to adulthood without her. I hear her telling me that she has shown me the way, and now I am ready to enter the flow of God's new movement confident of her still watching, interceding and loving unconditionally along with my father.

Thus, I continue to think of her when I give Communion to the older ladies who sit in the first pews of various churches, when I hear the lyrics, "Are you ready for some football?", when I pray the *In memoriam* of every Eucharistic prayer, when another grandchild has another defining movement, and when I champion a cause of one of my siblings. I will be open to the meaning of each new first (Thanksgiving, Christmas, her first birthday and her eternal birthday), missing her but knowing that she is smiling, for what else can one do in the presence of God? ■



---

*Reverend John Fisher, an Oblate of St. Francis de Sales (OSFS), serves in the Education Department at DeSales University in Center Valley, Pa. This is his first article in HPR.*