With Love and Reverence: The Christian Way of Dying

A family copes with the grim realities - and the supernatural joys - of a beloved mother’s death.

by Ann Margaret Lewis

It was the second Sunday of September when Mom called me: “Ann, I’m turning yellow.”

My mother, Mary Ann Goetz, had her gall bladder removed two weeks before. Although 80, she’d weathered that with flying colors, impressing the medical staff with her stamina.

But when she called me that day, I knew something was wrong.

A few days later, we learned Mom had a cancerous pancreatic tumor and only months to live. November will mark the one year anniversary of her death, and at this time of year, when Christians celebrate our beloved dead and the mystery of eternal life, I want to share one of the most difficult—and rewarding—events of my life.

Despite the diagnosis, Mom wanted chemo. However, after several weeks of trying to increase her strength for the treatment, my seven siblings and I realized it wasn’t possible. We had to prepare for the inevitable and help her approach death with hope, but this was going to require communication and sacrifice from all of us.

My dad died of cancer in 1980, and mom raised those of us who were still at home, but we’re now scattered across the country from Alaska to New Jersey with only two siblings living near her. So when this crisis hit, we began to “meet” in conference calls every Sunday evening to determine what needed to be done and establish a schedule for each of us to care for her. I posted this schedule on my web site.

With each of her children taking turns, the burden was lighter, especially for those who lived near Mom who had been carrying most of the load.

We also realized that we needed to clear up business issues so Mom didn’t have that additional stress. My mother had little money - only possessions such as furniture and mementos - but we wanted Mom’s wishes for these things to be made clear to avoid any contention. My eldest sister Theresa brought up a will. “Mom,” she said, “just in case things don’t go well, we should get all your paperwork in...
Even more important was managing her medical care. When one is faced with a terminal illness, hospitals ask for an Advance Directive or Do Not Resuscitate order (DNR). Advance Directives, also called “Living Wills,” specify the type of care a patient wishes to receive. However, Advance Directives are not as flexible as an individual who can make decisions in an instant. Advance Directives can also be misinterpreted by medical staff to go against Catholic teaching on life issues, so it is very important, if one signs an Advance Directive, that language be inserted to ensure Catholic teachings on life are followed.

The National Catholic Bioethics Center recommends instead that Catholics arrange a Medical Power of Attorney (also called a “Durable Power of Attorney”) in which another individual makes decisions for a patient’s care. Mom chose Theresa for this responsibility because of her proximity.

Above all, we needed to properly care for Mom’s soul. My Associate Pastor, Father Michael Magiera of the Priestly Fraternity of Saint Peter, lost his mother only a few months after I did. Like me, he took weeks off to care for her while she went in and out of hospitals and nursing homes. At his mother’s funeral, he said:

“Death is unnatural. Of course, it is inevitable. But I want you to realize that there is no equality with the words ‘natural’ and ‘inevitable.’... Death is a metaphysical evil, an absence, a nothingness, a void. It is our nature to shun such things.

The remedy? Christ, of course. Through His Redemptive Act, through the suffering and death of His humanity, He gave us something even better than the preternatural gift of immortality our original innocence gave us. Through His Sacrifice, prior to and necessary for His Resurrection, He destroyed death and enables us, through Grace, to elevate our fallen human natures in this life and, through the Church and Her Sacraments, furnishes us with vehicles to soar to endless heights in heaven following physical death.”

The best way to prepare our ailing loved ones for the ‘inevitable’ is through the Church and her sacraments. As a priest, Father was blessed to provide those graces to his mother personally. We made certain our mother had regular access to Anointing of the Sick, the Eucharist, and spiritual support from her priest. When she slipped into a coma, we prayed the rosary and Divine Mercy Chaplet at her bedside and placed a brown scapular around her neck.

We chose Catholic hospice care for her in her final days so she might die peacefully at home. They offered wonderful guidance and spiritual assistance. Even so, I declined an offer from a hospice consultant to do Reiki on Mom. This caused some conflict with my sister Karen, a registered nurse, who said it would relieve mom’s pain, but I did not trust it to be good for her soul when she was most vulnerable. My instincts turned out to be right. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has since issued a statement condemning the use of Reiki by Catholics.

While I understood Karen’s desire as a nurse and a loving daughter to spare my mom suffering, in our Catholic faith suffering unites us with Christ on the cross for the good of our soul. Mom’s pain was not worthless. It enabled her to cling to Christ for strength and become “as a little child” to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Four days before her death, Mom grew upset.

“I am not strong enough,” she said. I knew she meant she could not handle the pain and her inability to care for herself. She’d always been proud, healthy and independent, so this was an immense struggle for her.

I said, “Mom, you have to make yourself strong in here.” I tapped her chest.

“I don’t know how to do that.”

“Yes you do, Mom. You pray.” I placed her rosary in her hand.

I believe I was meant to be there for that moment. She needed to hear this. After that she did not fret over her discomfort as much as our having to care for her. While Karen reassured her that it was an honor to care for her, I pointed out what a gift my mother had given to the world in my sister, a wonderful nurse. Mom cried. Karen and I cried. But Mom knew how much her life was valued. Before this she had refused to let us feed her, insisting that she lift her own spoon though she was too weak. Now she finally allowed me to feed her oatmeal with raisins. She smiled and said it was delicious. She had become a little child again.

Mom finally passed into a peaceful coma and released her final breath just as her children began to pray the rosary at her bedside. She died as I hope to die, loved, and perfectly prepared to meet our Redeemer. We grieved, of course, but were at peace with the great love and reverence we’d shared for this wonderful woman who had given us life.

Ann Margaret Lewis writes science fiction and mystery novels and is a classical singer.