

The Story of a Mother's Soul

It was only one week before Christmas when we first learned about the condition of my mother's heart. That whole week from start to finish was a wave of hopes and fears. On that first day when she arrived at the hospital she immediately asked for a rosary. When my brother handed her one, she pulled up her sleeves and her fingers went straight to the beads as if they were saying: "Okay, let's get to work."

We found a terrific team of doctors who had much success in putting in a pacemaker. The head heart specialist, overjoyed at how Mom's procedure went, told my dad, "I think you will be able to bring your bride home." It was the happiest Christmas ever. We really thought Mom was on the mend. My dad walked through the hallways shouting "Merry Christmas" to everyone, like an Ebenezer Scrooge who was giddy with excitement because he realized he was getting a second chance, or a George Bailey who was running through the streets of Bedford Falls, happy to be alive and even happier about the troubles he had to face.

I went to see Mom Christmas Day. I fed her ice and spoke to her, yet she was still in a drowsy, sedated state. When I left her, my parting words were: "Get better fast; I have so much to tell you." The thought never crossed my mind that this would be the last time I would see her alive.

The very next night, the day after Christmas, my dad called me. It was the first time through all of this that my heart did not sink when the phone rang. I felt confident that the voice I was about to hear would speak comfort to me. Well, I was right. But not in the way I assumed.

The voice said, "Maria, this is your daddy." Nothing in his voice led me to believe that everything was not going well with Mom. "Hey Daddy." He then said, "I love you very much." "I love you, too, Daddy." "Maria, your mom just went to Heaven. I am so happy for her!" "What?" I asked, "How? What happened?"

"I was praying with her, one decade of the chaplet and one of the rosary and then her heart stopped beating. They worked to get her back for twenty minutes. We have done everything we could. God wanted her, Maria."

"Is your husband there?" "Yes," I said. "Then go to him and let him comfort you. I'm calling your brothers and sisters in the order God gave you all to us. I have called Francis and Elizabeth. You are our third born, so now I am calling you. I am going to go now. I need to call the rest of the children."

I started to struggle for air. Everything inside me was screaming. My heart should not beat if hers is no more. I should not breathe if she does not. Through her labor pains, I was brought into this world. The first breath I took she was there. For thirty years of my life, the only existence I knew, was her helping me along the way. If she were not beside me, then she would be just around the corner, if not around the corner, then only a phone call away.

The phone started to ring. I tried to pull myself together. It was my older brother Francis. "Most of us are going to the hospital to see Mom before they take her away. Would you like to come with us?"

When we walked into the hospital room, my mom was lying there on the bed with her heartbroken husband beside her. I knelt beside her bed and kissed her cheek. It was as soft as ever. I knew that feeling all too well, but this would be the last time. I wrapped my arms around her neck and cried out, "Thank you for everything, you have made me who I am."

My dad then said, "That is only her body, her soul is with God." "I know that Daddy, but this womb

bore eight children. These arms cared for us. These lips spoke only to bring us to Jesus. These hands never stopped working for us. This heart ached and literally broke for us.” “Then live her legacy,” my dad said.

As I tearfully clung to my mom, I looked up to see, opposite of me my little sister Anne, the baby of the family and only seventeen. Crying her eyes out she looked at me and said, “I can’t lose my mom! I need her; I need my mom.”

I grabbed her and just held her tight. There were no words. How do you say to a seventeen-year-old, it will be fine, it will be okay, when you yourself don’t even think it? “Death,” Anne said, “is like a thief in the night, and it stole my mom away from me.”

How personal these words are to us now. We may not have been ready for our dearest mom to leave this world, but Mom was always ready. She lived her whole life working at it — to be ready. How often I have thought, in the months of late, that Mom was always busy. She never gave herself time to just grow old and just be an old person.

My dad mentioned that my mom was looking forward to us Christmas caroling this year. As some families have their own baseball team, she had her own choir. We looked at each other and began to sing “*O Holy Night*.”

As the winter darkness was closing in on us, there was a light shining in a little hospital room where the children of a dedicated mother serenaded her over her lifeless body. Where four grown sons and four grown daughters, with tears streaming down their faces, sang to their mother a Christmas lullaby.

Mom took her last breath on the feast of the Holy Family. This little home schooling mother’s hands were now at rest. These hands, that only a week ago, were teaching her grandchildren, cooking a meal, wiping a dirty face, sweeping the floor, or sewing something. I remember she always thought that the fine arts of sewing and needlework were of the utmost importance to the formation of a well balanced and contented woman. She passed this on to her daughters and daughters-in-law and even the older granddaughters. Being a mother of eight she did not waste time in anything, thus, she taught us how to pray while we sewed. “This stitch,” she would say, “takes one Hail Mary to complete, so this whole item takes thirty Hail Marys.”

She applied St. Therese’s little way to wifedom and motherhood, in being a home schooling mother and grandmother. In all that her day entailed, she still found time for weekday Masses, daily family rosaries, Eucharistic adoration, chaplets and novenas. I can still see the glow of the lamplight under her bedroom door where she spent late nights praying and reading. We knew Mom must be feeling really ill if she did not pray the rosary on her knees. She strove daily to know God and to know herself, so as to grow perfect in the science of the saints. She would often say, “We all have the same twenty-four hours in a day — don’t waste them.”

I think back to my childhood, Mom taking me to church to make a visit to the Most Blessed Sacrament. I remember her holding my hand walking up the steps to the tabernacle whispering and pointing, “Jesus lives here.” She then genuflected and guided me to do so. Then she kissed the tabernacle and held me up to do the same. This was not a one-time occurrence and I know my siblings have similar memories.

Mom always heard us out; she always had time to listen, and I do not mean just to her own children. One lady told me, “Every time I spoke with your mom, she always left me with a bit of wisdom and encouraged me and that I was doing a good job and not to give up.” Another woman said, “Rosie always talked to me, not down to me.”

It has now been two months since Mom's passing and her eighteen grandchildren speak often of missing her. Almost daily she was with them, so even in a physical sense they are adjusting. But as the old normal was speaking to her, the new normal is now speaking to her and about her. I have often heard them say to each other things like, "Grandmama sees you," and "I'm telling Grandmama," or "I can't wait to go to Heaven and see Grandmama." Even the two year olds, when asked, "Where is Grandmama?" answer: "In Heaven." At the funeral home, they all approached the viewing in a very childlike manner. It was nothing short of poetry and psalm to see so many little ones around her looking upon her and touching her with no reserve. They were all her little flowers. We could not have placed more precious ones around her coffin.

This was a woman who in the eyes of the world went unnoticed. But in the eyes of her family and the countless lives she touched, she was indispensable. In her sixty-two years, she wrote much, taught much, and loved much. She was career minded in the broad sense of the word. Her chosen career, and her only career, was to be a good mother who stayed at home steering her little souls to the feet of Jesus. Never was there a career lived out so well. Never in the history of the world is there a career even half as important as that of being a full-time mother in every sense of the word.

How do I measure the success of my mother's career? I will tell you:

When I die, if any one of my four children knows and feels even half of what I know and feel of one mother's love and devotion to her family; if my daughter finds so much consolation in the thought that she knows she can still go on because of what she was taught from infancy—from the bond that had formed from receiving nourishment from her mother's breast, from the help she received in taking her first steps and guiding her hands through the sign of the cross, learning how to pray, to speak, to read and dress, bathe, clean, sew and cook. Also to be a good wife, give birth and to nourish and care for a baby properly, make a peaceful home and most of all, to make a good and holy life — then I shall praise my God in thanksgiving with all my heart, because I have left behind hope in a very confused world. Because, through my God who strengthens me, I will have left behind a daughter who has the tools she needs to become a good and holy mother: **The one thing this world needs most.**

In this world my mother Rosie left behind, her husband Robert Gil, eight children, and eighteen grandchildren. She was a mother before us and for us.