

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I prayed for a long time that this day would never come that I would have to stand before you Craig and Paul and Emilie and Ben; beloved Parents, Sister and Brothers, and beautiful Family to offer you the deepest sympathy of our whole Church Family. But here we are.

In ministry with Joanne we had so many beautiful moments and conversations over these many years. In this past year, however, most of our conversations were by telephone. At the end of each conversation, I would usually say “Have a good day or evening,” or “Good night and God bless you,” and end by saying, “I love you”. Invariably, Joanne would respond, “I love you more”, to which I could only respond, “Thank you”, because it was true. Joanne simply loved more, better, greater than most of us.

We are all gathered here today for the simple reason that Joanne loved us more. No one could be in her presence without an experience of being welcomed, appreciated, validated, or, simply, loved.

When I first met her, I, like so many, was drawn to her by her music—her beautiful voice accompanied by her virtuosity at the keyboard. While that drew me to Joanne, it wasn’t what truly awakened my appreciation of her. It was rather the deep, spiritual reservoir from which the music flowed that made every song she sang, every tune she played, a call to prayer.

It was her deep spirituality, her union with God if you will, that made Joanne such a loving and beloved part of our lives; none more so than you, Craig. You were the love of her life. To paraphrase the Sacred Writer, in Joanne you found a worthy wife, her value far beyond pearls. In entrusting your heart to her, you won an unfailing prize, who has brought you good, and not evil, all the days of her life.

By entrusting your heart to her, Craig, it has been awesome to see you grow and expand as a man, as a husband, and as a father that has been one of the most beautiful transformations I’ve ever seen.. To know that your tribute to Joanne is to perform an act of kindness every day for the rest of your life for a perfect stranger and invite others to do the same in her memory speaks of how totally transformed you are. Then, to witness the tender, patient, loving care that you so devotedly showered upon Joanne has been both exhilarating and humbling. The great example that you provided for your children was immortalized by Emilie in her Facebook post on March 31st, where she shows you and Joanne in sleepy embrace and says, “I snuck this pic of my parents yesterday and I think my Dad is doing the absolute best job takin care of my Mama and I want everyone to see how adorable they are.” Thank you, Emilie.

Proverbs also tells us that the children of this worthy woman “rise up and call her blessed”. Paul, Ben, Emilie, I remember when your Mother was first diagnosed, her greatest fear, her only fear, was that she would not be here for you; to see you grow; to help you become all that you wanted to be.

Paul, it was you who called her out of that fear by asking her to tell you the truth of what was happening. In doing so, you helped her to be honest not just with you, but with herself, and the rest of us. And you were only eleven years old. You truly were her reason for living. She wanted to protect you as a lioness does her cubs and embrace you always in the warmth of her love.

Above all she wanted to share her greatest gift with you, her faith in God. That's why she worked, even in her illness, two full-time jobs to provide a Catholic education for you. That was so important to her because she knew that the source of all her love was the loving relationship she had with God and she wanted that, above all, for you. She pleaded with God to allow her to be here for you and so she battled the insidious disease that we dare not call its name for these thirteen years, with only one thought and prayer in her heart—to see you “rise up”. To see you become the magnificent, gifted young men and woman that you are was her deepest desire, her greatest joy. She truly has been for you a Blessed Mother.

Again Proverbs speaks of Joanne in saying, “She is clothed with strength and dignity, and laughs at the days to come. She opens her mouth in wisdom; kindly instruction is on her tongue.” We can't possibly wonder where did she get such strength to endure so much for so long, with such dignity, never losing her sense of humor, always welcoming, appreciating, validating, and loving those of us blessed to be in her life.

What was it about Joanne that brought light and joy and happiness into every situation, every room, every relationship she entered? I believe, my dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, she really did embody these teachings of Jesus that we call the Beatitudes, or as I like to refer to them, Attitudes of Being.

Another translation of the blessedness of the Beatitudes is happiness. “Happy are the poor in spirit; the mournful; the meek; the merciful; the clean of heart; and the peacemakers.” Joanne quite simply was a happy woman in good times and bad; in sickness and in health.

Because of this “happiness” or inner peace, if you will, Joanne was able to walk the walk she walked because she talked with Him; she knew He walked with her; and she trusted Him to guide her along life's highway—wherever it took her, and she never complained.

When she could no longer lift her voice in praise of God, she sang the most beautiful hymns of her life, not only in the way she endured her suffering, but in the joy that continued to

flow from her that drew us deeper in love with her and deeper in love with the source of her love, the Lord Himself.

In a conversation we had a few weeks ago, I happened to mention Ann Briggs, another Saint of our Parish, who had walked the walk that Joanne was walking. Joanne remembered that even as she was dying, Ann sat with the children when Joanne began her treatments. I told her that Ann said to me as she faced dying, “I just want to do this the right way.” Joanne said to me, “That’s exactly what I want. I don’t want to be sad and miserable, and I don’t want others to be either.”

It was after that conversation that these words from St. Paul to Timothy came to me as to what was in the heart of Joanne, “The time of my departure is at hand. I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord, the just judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but to all who have longed for his appearance”.

Ben, I remember asking you shortly after your Mother went to be with the Lord, how you were doing. You simply said, “I’m happy. I’m happy her suffering is over.” I could identify with that because that is exactly what I felt the day my Mother died after a prolonged and painful illness. Like you, I was twenty-two at the time.

It was only many years later that I was able to identify a disappointment, even an anger, at God, for allowing my Mother to suffer so and taking her away from me so soon. I realized that I felt that God had failed me. He didn’t answer my prayers. He didn’t heal her or protect her from such terrible pain.

It took me some time to realize that it wasn’t about me. God didn’t take her from me, rather He gave her the reward of her goodness. And He really did answer my prayer because, at the end, I was praying that God take her home as the way to relieve her suffering and pain.

Perhaps it might help you and others among us in need of comfort to dwell for a moment, not on who your Mother was and how she became all that came to be to us, but rather reflect on what has become of her.

From time to time I’ve had what I believe are certain visions in my life which I’d like to share with you. You may hear them as the wild imaginings of a crazy, old man. I like to think of them as glimpses of the holy that God gave me to sustain me in my weakness.

Many years ago, after multiple surgeries, I basically died. I had no pulse, no heartbeat, I stopped breathing. I heard people, doctors, nurses hollering these things, but their voices became more and more distant.

I felt myself being drawn from that room, even from my own body, into a light which I can only describe as brighter than anything I'd ever seen. As I was drawn into this light, I felt this warm, even affectionate embrace. I remember saying to myself, "Well, I guess this is it. I'm going home." I knew I was dying. The only thing I felt was the warm, affectionate embrace and the sense of going home.

Some time later. I don't know how long. I felt this terrible pain in my back and everything became dark. I said to myself, "This can't be heaven because it hurts like hell. It was only later, after I recovered, that it was explained to me that the pain was caused by what they called "heart massage", you know, where they jump on you and slam both fists into your chest to restart your heart.

I tell you this, because as we knelt around your Mother's bed, praying the Rosary last Tuesday, it occurred to me that was what she was experiencing—the warm, affectionate embrace as she was being drawn into a light brighter than light and the sense that she was going home. I believe too she could hear all of us praying around her, I believe that's what brought that beautiful smile to her face as she went home.

Then, as I laid in bed on Tuesday night, looking up at the ceiling, unable to sleep, tears still streaming out my eyes, as I remembered how peacefully her spirit left her while we were praying the fifth glorious mystery, Mary's being crowned Queen of Heaven, another vision I had years ago was reawakened in me. The vision first came to me when we dedicated the statue of our Blessed Mother in front of the Parish Center.

In that vision I saw Mary, a widow, a senior citizen. Somehow, though she is never portrayed that way, she lived a very long time after Jesus' suffering, dying, and rising. I believe she understood that when Jesus spoke to her from the Cross, "Woman, there is your son," He meant for her to mother, not just John, but all his disciples, as well as to mother His Church into being. And so she did—she did as He wished. But she did all that mothering with the heavy heart of a widowed mother who had lost her only child.

I saw Mary living, quietly alone for those many years, visited in fits and starts, by the likes of Peter, James, John, and the rest of them. Always when they came, they would ask about Him. What was He like as a child? It was the Evangelist, Luke, who was most interested in the story of His birth, His early life. And how Mary loved telling the stories. How she delighted in recounting the smallest details—like when she told of how they had lost Him on the way home from Jerusalem and how frightened she and Joseph were as they ran back in search of Him.

Then, they would leave, and she would be all alone again—with her memories, her sadness, her pain. And she waited. It seemed like forever. She never thought that she would have lived all those years so terribly alone. But she kept on mothering---the disciples, the infant Church. The memories never left her. Not the sadness. Not the pain. And she waited.

The years brought their own hardships. Arthritis had set in. She could no longer straighten her gnarled fingers; nor her back, bent from years of hauling all those buckets of water from the well. She was a little wobbly on her feet now, nowhere near as strong as they were when she and Joseph fled into Egypt to protect their Infant. And she waited.

Then, one warm summer evening she thought she heard a familiar voice. “Could it be? Am I hearing things now? But it sounds so much...but it couldn’t be. What’s happening?” And He stood before her. “Mother, it’s time. Come home! Come home with Me!” He took her by the hand and her fingers straightened and her hands were strong and young again. As she got to her feet, her back became straight and she was walking or was she running or dancing. She was delirious with joy. Then someone took her other hand. “Why, it’s Joseph! My dear, dear Joseph!”

“Where am I?” What is this?” There are choirs all around! Shouts of jubilation! ALLELUIA!!!

Then Jesus and Joseph escort her into the PRESENCE. THE ALL-HIGH, THE ALL HOLY, THE ALMIGHTY ONE. He steps from the throne. “What is this? He’s placing a crown on my head.” The roar is deafening. All the louder they shout---ALLELUIA!!! GLORY TO GOD!!! Heaven has received its Queen.

Mary waits no longer—for Jesus. But still she waits. She waits for us because, you see, we, all of us, yes, we are all still her children. And so Mary waits.

This vision was reawakened in me on Tuesday night as I laid in my bed looking up at the ceiling, remembering our prayer around Joanne earlier that day. As I remembered our ending our prayer, “Hail, holy Queen, Mother of mercy, our life, our sweetness, and our hope, to you do we cry poor, banished children of Eve, to you do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this vale of tears...”, my vision continued.

In this vision I saw Joanne pass through the bright cloud of heaven’s warm, affectionate embrace. All of a sudden she sees a great body of people, loved ones who went before—grandparents, teachers, students, so many whom she loved and who had loved her. They cried! They shouted with joy! They danced and they sang and Joanne with them. “It’s true. It’s really true,” she thought, “It really is a great Family Reunion. “When all God’s children get together, what a time, what a time, what a time,. When all God’s children get together what a time we’re gonna have!”

“There’s someone here who wants to meet you,” she’s told. She stands before her, just as John speaks of her in his vision, given in Revelations: “clothed with the sun, with a moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.” Mary draws Joanne to herself and hugs her warmly. She says, “Thank you for calling on me so often for so many. I loved

that you always depended on me to intercede for you, especially for your husband and your children.” “Please come now. My Son is anxious to meet you.”

As Jesus walks toward her, Joanne feels faint. She starts to fall. Jesus reaches out to her and draws her to Himself. He then speaks the familiar words that Joanne always yearned to hear, “Well done, well done, My good and faithful servant...come share your Master’s joy.”

With Mary holding her up on one side and Jesus on the other, they escort Joanne into a hugh banquet hall, with tiers and tiers of balconies and an enormous shout goes up, choirs sing, alleluias ring, and the melody of a thousand symphonies, rise up in harmony as they approach a throne shrouded as in a cloud, and the Divine Presence moves toward her and from the cloud a crown is placed on Joanne’s head. And the heavens roar. ALLEULUIAS ring!

It was then that Joanne bowed low before the Most High God of heaven and earth and offered the gifts she had to bring—all the love she had in her heart for us and all the beautiful gifts of love that she received from us.

Church, here and now, we are gathered before the heavenly banquet table, surrounded by the whole heavenly host, if we believe what we say this Eucharist is. So, please stand on your feet, put your hands together, join the heavenly host and the communion of saints. Glorify God with them for Joanne. ALLELUIA!!! GLORY!!! THANK YOU!!! THANK YOU FOR JOANNE!!! On earth with us and now in heaven! ALLELUIA!!! GLORY!!! Victory is hers! ALLELUIA!!! No more suffering! No more sickness! No more pain! THANK YOU, JESUS! THANK YOU, LORD! GLORY! GLORY TO GOD! ALLELUIA!