

## Homily for Memorial Mass November 12, 2017

I'm sure that each of us here this morning has experienced the death of more than one person we loved. Although we probably think of them every day and pray for them often, coming together for a Memorial Liturgy is a special time to pray in gratitude for their lives and to ask for help for ourselves as we suffer the pain of their being gone from our sight. It also gives us the opportunity to ponder the meaning of life and the mystery of death. So, I want to share a few of my ponderings with you in the hope that they might encourage yours.

A few years ago, my brother-in-law had a heart attack and died suddenly in a parking lot. As my sister, her four grown daughters, and I stood around his bed in the hospital emergency room immediately after his death, my nieces began to ask me questions about death, mistakenly thinking that a nun would know the answers. "Is dad already in heaven or does it take a while for him to get there?" "Do you think he's seen grandma there yet?" and "What happens if he has to stop in purgatory?" I told them that I didn't know the answers to their questions because death is a mystery and that the only thing I was sure of was that their dad was with God. "How can you know that for sure?" one of them asked. "Because I believe what we all learned in the first grade," I said, "that God is everywhere, with us, around us, and in us. I don't understand how that can be and that's the mystery, but I believe it's also the truth."

I thought a lot about my nieces' questions during the years after that day as I tried, not for the first time, to probe the meaning of life and the mystery of death. I read many books and meditated on Jesus' words in Scripture. What did He mean when He said He would give us eternal life? Did he mean our bodies would live forever or our spirits or both? How do Scripture scholars interpret Jesus' words today? What about the idea of Teilhard de Chardin, the famed French Philosopher, who believed that we are not physical human beings having a spiritual experience, but spiritual beings having a human experience.

While much of what I read was interesting, I haven't found the answers to the questions I was asking. And one day, not long ago, I rather suddenly realized that it doesn't matter. What difference does it make how long it takes the spirit to be

with God after the body dies? What does matter is that we believe God is with us, in us, body and spirit wherever we are. Does it really matter if I recognize those I loved on earth when our spirits meet one another in heaven? Surely not. When I am totally immersed in the wonder of the God of love, I will need nothing else to complete my happiness. The more we meditate on the description of heaven in the Scriptures, the more irrelevant seem our questions. A psalm like the one that was our first reading this morning is all we really need to know and believe about death and heaven. In it, the psalmist says to God:

“When our days on earth are ended, you welcome us home to your heart, to the city of light, where time is eternal and days are not numbered.” When we meditate on being welcomed to the heart of God for all eternity, what questions matter about such bliss?

So I asked myself, where did all this pondering about life and death lead me? Where can it help lead you? Hopefully to a stronger belief that, while our present life is temporary, the one to come is permanent because it is the life of our spirit which lives forever. How can that belief console us at the time of the death of a loved one? Hopefully, it can help us remember that her or his spirit is permanently happy, so that we encourage ourselves to be only temporarily sad for the loss of those who are gone from our sight and pray to be happy for what they have permanently gained. How can we once and for all explain the meaning and the mystery of life and death? We can't! But every once in a while, we are given little hints about it. So, I want to close with a hint I received two or three years ago.

A woman in her 40's named Rose who came to me for counseling was grieving the death of her partner. She was lonely and had no family other than one sister who lived at a distance. She was a strong woman who had served in the Army for several years and had survived more than one bout of colon cancer. When the doctor told her that she had it again, she told me not to worry, that she would be fine after they cut out another piece and that she'd be back to see me in a few weeks. However, the doctor said the cancer had spread throughout her body. When I went to see her in the hospital, she was in pain, but was still hopeful that she'd recover. By the time I saw her again only two days later, she

was on morphine and only semi-conscious. I felt bad that I hadn't visited her the day before and, though I didn't know if she could hear or understand me, I apologized to her and promised I'd pray for her. Her only relative, a sister who was there from Florida, told me that she would let me know if Rose died before I could come see her again. That evening, I went to bed at 11:15 and woke up at midnight. I felt so wide awake that I decided to stay up and read for a while. As I reached for a book, there was a knock on my bedroom door; when I answered the door, no one was there. I sat down on my bed again and immediately my phone rang. It was her sister telling me that Rose had just died. The next morning, just to make sure that I wasn't mistaken, I asked the Sister who sleeps in the room next to me if she slept well that night. She said that she had, but that she had heard someone knocking on a door and wondered who it was.

Looking back on that evening, I have no doubt that it was Rose's spirit who came to say good-bye, not just because the timing of the knock and the phone call were almost simultaneous, but also because she was the kind of woman who would have wanted to tell me that all was well between us.

I think I received a very big hint about spirits that night –and a huge confirmation that life and death will always be profound mysteries no matter how much we ponder. I hope that if you tend to reflect on those mysteries, you will receive an equally helpful spiritual gift.

Sr. Mary Ellen Rufft