

Second Sunday of Lent (March 7-8, 2020)  
St. Mary's Catholic Church, Richmond VA  
Fr. Michael Renninger

Her funeral was this past Wednesday. She was my friend for close to 25 years. I miss her.

And I thank God that I got to see her before she died. She had been in and out of St. Mary's hospital since Christmas. Her family called me with hard news. It appeared that the end was near.

When I walked into her room, she was wearing one of those big oxygen masks, which was working hard to get additional oxygen into her weakened lungs. She was clearly exhausted, and asleep. I spoke with her family a bit, and then she woke up.

The time came for us to celebrate the Sacrament of Anointing. When we began, she smiled a bit. I anointed her with the Oil of the Sick. Her husband and daughters joined in as we prayed the Lord's Prayer.

And although it is not officially part of the ritual, I usually sing something to conclude the anointing. I lowered my face to be closer to her, I closed my eyes and started to sing: "Be not afraid..."

Before I fully realized what was happening, I heard another voice, singing with me. I opened my eyes and saw that the woman I had just anointed, the woman whose face was covered with an oxygen mask, was bravely singing with me. So we continued: "Be not afraid, I go before you always. Come follow me, and I will give you rest."

There she was, a woman already making the transition from this life to eternal life, *singing* the core of her faith: "*be not afraid.*" And, she *wasn't* afraid. In fact, on her face was a big smile.

And I thought to myself: she's *radiant!*

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In today's Gospel, *Jesus is radiant*.

And like the woman I anointed a week ago, Jesus's radiance happens as death is near. This whole scene of the Transfiguration takes place *as Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem... to die*.

Jesus knows that his death is coming. He spoke honestly about the cross to his disciples.

And with death is in the air, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up the mountain. He becomes *radiant* before their eyes. Everything about him, from his clothing to his face, is transfigured by something glorious.

Remember, these are the same three disciples – Peter, James, and John – who will see Jesus sweating blood in the Garden of Gethsemane. They will see him arrested. They will see him die.

Yet Jesus says to them, “Do not be afraid.” They will see the worst happen to him, but in this moment of transfiguration, he is giving them a glimpse of what the resurrection will look like. He is encouraging them to have faith, to believe that not even death can rob him of his dignity. He is showing all of us what *our* future holds, if we *listen to him* and *follow him*.

Like anyone who is facing suffering or death, Jesus had a choice to make. On one hand, He could have chosen to focus on his own pain or fear.

But instead, he chose to do what so many noble souls have done even as death hunts them down. He *radiated* love. He *radiated* faith. Everything about him was proclaiming: *Be not afraid*.

On that mountaintop, God gave us a glimpse of how the terrible tragedy of Jesus' death was going to be transformed into something glorious on Easter morning.

And if God can do that for Jesus, God can do that for us. God sent Jesus to die and rise for us. That risen Jesus is walking beside us. And because of that, God is saying to us that no matter what suffering is ours, no matter what cross we are carrying, God can transfigure *our* dying into glorious *rising*. So the message for me and for you is: *be not afraid*.

Jesus knew that God was not going to give up on him. That woman I anointed had faith that God was not going to give up on her. There is no one on earth that God is willing to give up on!

So – if *God* does not give up on people, why do I give up on people? So often, I give in to my fears. I conclude that there are people for whom there is no hope, there are situations and problems that cannot be changed. I listen to my fears.

But, Transfigurations happen all the time.

Which brings me back to my friend in the hospital. She was able to sing “Be not afraid” at the end of her life, because she had experienced the power of God’s transfiguring love throughout her life! She knew that she didn’t have to be afraid during her dying, because God had taught her not be afraid during her living! And she chose, she *chose*, to use her time here on earth to make a difference in the lives of other people. She did not give *up*. Instead, she gave... *generously*... and with gladness.

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## PARTICIPATION IN THE ANNUAL DIOCESAN APPEAL

Throughout the diocese this weekend, Catholics are being invited to participate in the holy work of transforming people’s lives through the Annual Diocesan Appeal.

If you are a long-time member of the parish, you know that we do this only once a year. We have the opportunity to talk about the ways in which our diocesan church is working generously to transform and transfigure the lives of our neighbors.

Following the example of Jesus, we refuse to give up on people. Instead, we give, and give generously.

This year, the money raised by the annual appeal will provide much needed assistance to transform the lives of people right here in southern Virginia. The appeal will support expanded campus ministries at the numerous universities your children and grandchildren attend in southern Virginia. The appeal supports ministries to migrant workers, African Americans, recent immigrants and those in prison.

The appeal supports the education of future priests, and helps to provide direct assistance to neighbors who cannot feed their families or pay for heat in the coldest months of the year. And, as always, a significant portion of your gift to the annual appeal comes right back to Saint Mary's, so that we can make lives more radiant and hopeful right here on Gayton Road.

Many of you have already received a mailing from the diocese about the appeal. If you have already sent in your pledge, I thank you.

After receiving the mailing from the diocese, one parishioner asked me, "Is any of this appeal money going to be used to pay legal fees or settlements for clergy abuse cases?" That is an important and honest question. And the honest answer is: no. Not one penny of this appeal money can be used for legal settlements. All of the money given to the appeal must be used for the charitable purposes which are outlined in the Case for Support.

If you have not had a chance to send in your pledge, or if you have not received a mailing, today is your lucky day!

This is everybody's favorite part! In your pews, right now, there are appeal brochures, along with little pencils that we liberated from a local golf course. Please pass them out in your pew. One envelope per household. Please don't steal the pencils at the end of mass! If you need more, raise your hands and ushers will assist you.

At your leisure, you can review the description of the Appeal. Right now, I ask you to turn to the last page, where you will see a form with a large purple Number One near the top.

On that same page, we ask you to fill in your contact info:

- + name, spouses name address, etc.
- + Parish name and CITY

Turn that page over and look for the large purple 2 at the top. There are options for the amount of your gift, and whether it is intended to be a monthly gift or one time gift.

- +At the purple number 3, you may enter info for your credit card.
- + at purple number 4, you can indicate if you are going to include a check today. No cash please.

If you would like info about legacy giving, circle the section under number 5, or contact the diocese at the addresses shown.

Seal and collect.

I know that it is a bit awkward to actually do fundraising paperwork in the middle of mass once a year. Believe me, priests don't like doing it. But I am also aware that, with every envelope that is filled out, and every gift that is given, there is a person somewhere in Virginia whose life will be positively changed because of you. With every generous gift that is made today, someone in Virginia will have hope tomorrow. Your participation in the Appeal will help to transfigure someone else's life.

Your giving helps other people to hear the powerful message from Christ: *Be not afraid!*

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