

Prayers for a happy death



You know those summer days when the only word for the sunlight is brilliant? That is how I would describe the morning of Saturday, July 13. All of creation seemed to be reverencing the life of Jim Rutherford on the day of his funeral Mass.

By earthly standards alone, it was a devastatingly sad day. A 52-year-old husband and father had died. He left behind Dori, his beloved wife, and their young children, who were also beacons of light. They were living embodiments that we are not called to live for this life alone, but we should prepare to see the face of God.

His pastor – a dear friend who celebrated the funeral Mass – demonstrated confidence in the hope of faith, giving Jim the sacraments as soon as the ambulance door opened at the hospital and before the machines took over earlier this month. Jim had a devotion to St. Joseph and prayed for a happy death. Hearing this in standing-room-only at St. Rita's Church, we were not only praying for Jim's eternal rest and for consolation for his family, we were left thirsting for a happy death ourselves.

How could a priest have such confidence about the end of my days, whenever it should come? I wasn't the only one who walked away asking that. And perhaps it was because the morning sky was so radiantly blue that I couldn't help but think of the Marian nature of this man who loved St. Joseph. He had a kind of receptivity to his faith: one that we don't talk enough about, especially when it comes to men.

It seemed impossible not to notice why Jim and Dori loved St. Rita's, along with those who raved to me about it over the years. It was not only that heaven and earth so clearly met on

the altar. It was not only that the veil seemed thinner there between the same. It was not only that the walls of the Gothic church seemed to echo the words we prayed that Jim would be hearing as he saw the face of the Father: "Well done, good and faithful servant." It was that everything and everyone in that Church seemed to be focused on the Trinity from the moment we walked in. Even before and after Mass, the tabernacle, clothed in white, focused the heart and mind. The bridegroom and the bride – Christ and the Church – makes so much sense, even in its mystery. As we could have been shaking our heads asking, "Why?", we were also looking straight ahead at Jesus, trusting that there's a divine plan at work that we can't fully see but in which we still have faith.

Earlier that week, on another day when the skies seemed to be a reminder of perpetual light, I walked through a school in New York that was just days away from officially closing. When my father died just about 20 years ago now, I often thought that he gave his life for St. Rose of Lima School – an institution dedicated to Catholic education and the families there. Like Jim, he served his Church and family. He had Christian hope, and his packed funeral Mass seemed to testify to the kind of holy life he inspired people to live. Walking through what was once a thriving school was another kind of grieving, one others in the Church increasingly experience.

I don't know why Jim or my father died when they did, other than the medical facts. I don't know if we could have done things to prevent St. Rose from closing. I do know that you and I have another today as I'm writing and you're reading this, but we're called to be good stewards of our gifts. Even through our tears, we labor on with love for one another and with the memory of beloved ones who did the same for as long as they lived in the light of faith.

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