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Life is Worth Giving

DEATH AND RESURRECTION AT EASTER, AND ALWAYS

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

The phone call came very early on All Souls Day, Nov. 2, some five months ago. It was a Sunday morning, and I was on my way to offer early Mass at St. Daniel the Prophet Church in Wheaton, Ill. The voice, with more than a tinge of sorrow in it, was that of my neice, Felicia.

"I have some bad news," she said, "you're brother, Desie, just died a few minutes ago."

Although his death had been somewhat expected, since he had suffered from Alzheimer's Disease for a few years and seemed to have lost interest in living. But the shock was there: insistent, demanding my attention, and the great sense of loss of a beloved brother who was so full of life for most of the 74 years he had here on earth.

I offered Mass at the parish but didn't mention anything about my brother's death until I was leaving. By then I was fighting back tears and trying to compose myself for my next Mass in Joliet, Ill., and a later talk on "Celtic Spirituality and Resurrection" at Old St. Patrick's Church in downtown Chicago.

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I somehow managed, with the help of God and some dear friends, to get through all of the day's activities — and then went home and wept.

Then came the rush of getting a flight back home to New Jersey, attending the wake to greet Family and friends, and then offering the Requiem Mass and preaching the homily with tears in my eyes and sorrow in my heart. Then followed the burial and the Family gathering afterwards, and the flight back to Chicago.

In the ensuing days, although filled with necessary activities, there was time for mourning and the sudden tears that came unbidden to my eyes.

Childhood Memories

Memories of childhood returned when Desie was a more than adventurous boy who loved life and people. Even our old pastor, Msgr. Mark Duffy, loved to tell the story of Desie's promise to the Christ Child, if a gift of a new sled arrived for Christmas, the first ride would be for the Infant Jesus.

When Desie arrived at St. Aloysius Church the day after Christmas to take the statue of the Infant Saviour for a ride on the sled, Msgr. Duffy intervened. The elderly pastor applauded Desie's keeping of his promise, but explained that it would be much better for the Christ Child to remain in the creche at church for all to visit.

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One of the big celebrations of the year in our area was Decoration Day (also known as Memorial Day). Hundreds of people visited Holy Name Cemetery in our neighborhood to "decorate" the graves of those who died in various wars, and all deceased relatives. Desie was always there early in the morning with a watering can and other garden tools to assist in the planting of flowers and tidying of graves.

Easter Glorious Time

And Easter in our childhood was often a glorius time after all the startling liturgical events to commemorate in Holy Week. One of our favorite pastimes was to gather a group to visit seven churches on Holy Thursday, and especially to pray and view the elaborately decorated Blessed Sacrament altar set with banks of flowers and candles. Such visits involved quite a bit of walking but we sometimes imagined ourselves as holy pilgrims seeking Christ. And we usually concluded that the best decorated altar was in our home parish.

But Easter also involved being dressed up in our best clothing. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, it wasn't often that we had brand-new suits, but our best clothes were always cleaned and pressed by our Mom who wanted her four boys neat and spotless for the celebration of the Lord's Resurrection on Easter Sunday.

The four of us would be decked out in our best suits, and usually with felt fedoras to complete our ensembles. Desie was usually the best dressed and neatest of all, a trait that remained with him all his life. And he especially enjoyed celebrating Easter and Christmas, almost as though he wanted to re-capture the joy and happiness of those childhood celebrations.

As we grew older, Easter and Resurrection took a more prominent place in our thinking and outlook. The death of our parents, and later the death of his close friends, touched Desie deeply. He attended wakes and funerals with great fervour and regularity. And he religiously delivered Memorial Mass cards for so many, even those who might only be considered casual friends. He also requested Memorial Masses on the anniversaries of departed relatives and friends.

Mass of Christian Burial

When our Family and friends gathered for Desie's Mass of Christian Burial, we were consoled that we were living out in the Liturgy his, and our, deep belief in not only the Lord's Resurrection but our own. As St. Paul admonished us, we were consoling each other with the Gospel Message of Resurrection and the firm belief that one day we would all be together in eternity where there would be no tears, no pain, no sorrow, no parting — but simply rejoicing forever.

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We would be together forever with the Lord in the Kingdom of God for Easter and always.

And this is the legacy of a little boy named Desie, our brother, who lived Resurrection all the days of his life, and does so now forever.

"I am the Resurrection and the life," said the Lord. And that is what Desie is living now and forever.