



Journey

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MAY THE ANGELS WELCOME YOU

by Marie Therese Ruthmann

"WELL, HE DID IT." It has been two years since my brother-in-law's voice over the phone ended a three-day vigil of what I can only call "hope against hope." My handsome 34-year-old nephew Rich had hanged himself in a park 20 minutes from his parents' home. Remembering his birthday each year on Nov. 13 brings the events back with waves of pain. Yet at this time in our church's history, when many priests continue to suffer from the scandal of a few, I am filled with admiration and gratitude to a priest who, although he had not known our family, guided us through the day of Rich's funeral Mass and burial.

Rich was adopted. My sister and brother-in-law had opened their hearts to this engagingly beautiful baby boy when he was three months old. Ecstatic is not too strong a word to describe their joy as they welcomed him to join them and his three-year-old sister, who was also adopted. The announcement said, "He wasn't expected; he was selected."

My brother-in-law gave him his own and his grandfather's names, and the entire family thanked God for the gift of this child. Then to their surprise and delight, as often happens, one-and-a-half years later, Joan and Dick gave birth to their own biological son. Yet when my brother-in-law had both boys with him, passersby would comment on how much Rich looked like him. These parents loved all three children with complete acceptance and gratitude.

As the years went on, however, there were many indications that Rich was a troubled child, moody, rebellious and depressed. His parents had to take him often for professional help during his adolescence. They enrolled him sequentially in three different colleges, where they knew he could get help with his learning disability. He was not motivated and did not go to class. By sheer force of personality, he spent a decade getting jobs as a waiter, chef, caterer, butler, salesman and, finally, a building-and-grounds manager of a large estate.

During these years Rich often escaped into drugs. His parents never knew when a phone call would come from him in another state saying he needed financial and legal help. Neither unconditional acceptance nor tough love enabled him to find himself. The fact that his birth parents had "given him away" continually gnawed at his peace, so that he never felt at home with himself. Rich was unsuccessful in keeping a job; he lost his last one, managing a widow's estate, when she remarried. Less than a year later Rich called his father to say that he could not go on without a job or money. My brother-in-law mailed him a bus ticket, welcomed him home, and asked only that he find some kind of job in what was, unfortunately, an economically depressed area.

For the next two months Rich appeared upbeat. With this artistic talent, he cheerfully helped his mother with some redecorating and treated his parents

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and their guests to his best culinary treats. But one Tuesday evening, he took the car to have dinner with a former classmate and did not come home.

On Thursday, I received two voice-mail messages from Rich, but he left no number where I could return his call. On Friday, I received a letter from him (as did each of his parents and his sister and brother), thanking me for always accepting him, for being there for him. To my terror he added, "Don't think that there was anything you could have done to stop me." Then he called again and left a message with a request for money and this time a return number. But the number turned out to be that of a nursing home, where no one knew him. I frantically called my brother-in-law, who called the nursing home, drove around the neighborhood and inquired for clues. We spent a night of praying and waiting.

Early the next morning my sister and brother-in-law saw a car stop outside their home. The sheriff opened the back car door, and they expected to see Rich get out. Instead the man reached for a duffel bag with all of Rich's identification on it, including a note to give to his parents. The sheriff asked them to come to the morgue to identify the body of a young man a jogger had discovered hanging from park bleachers. It was Rich. This is when they called me.

A social worker in their parish came to see Rich's parents that evening with an assurance born of her experience. "Your son did what in his mental illness he thought was the most loving thing. He made sure not to end his life in your home or even in your town. He also made sure that he would be identified immediately so as to lessen your waiting. These are signs that he wished to cushion the blow of what he felt was his last resort to be free of his 'demons.'"

My sister was devastated by their son's death. Adding to their agony was the fact that they lived in a parish without a resident priest; it was administered by a young lay couple, and various priests came to offer Mass on Sunday. Later, friends and neighbors would drop by, send notes and flowers and bring food, but my brother-in-law arranged for a funeral mass elsewhere. He called the parish where Rich's grandmother had lived before she went into assisted living nearer her family. The pastor knew only the grandmother, but immediately offered to preside at the Mass. My sister could not bear a formal wake, but the night before the funeral she invited members of the immediate family—including me, my other sister and her husband, and my brother and his wife—to go in and see my nephew lying so uncharacteristically still in death. When I later commented to the mortician how relieved I was at Richard's appearance, the man answered, "I consider my ability to make a

dead person look at peace for his family a ministry and an art. Because of the high shirt collar and T-shirt, you see no sign of the rope burn on Rich's neck."

The next day a few close family members and friends met to welcome the body at the door of the church. I was steeling myself for what might be a cold, detached ritual. The priest knew virtually nothing about my family except what my brother-in-law had told him on the phone.

We went into the small foyer where the coffin waited. Suddenly the priest appeared like a very tall archangel, garbed in a white surplice, and introduced himself with quiet compassion to each one of the immediate family. I felt as if I were a participant in the Gospel account of the angel at Jesus' tomb comforting the grieving women. My tears started when I saw my sister standing there at a loss, waiting.

Then the priest took charge. "I invite Richard's parents to cover his casket with the white pall that symbolizes his baptism, his dying and rising in Christ." With amazing composure, after several days in shock, my sister and brother-in-law slowly and reverently did so as they might years ago have drawn up a blanket over their sleeping child. The priest continued, "I'm told that Richard's brother and sister will read the selections from the Bible?" Mimi and Stephen nodded and joined their parents at the coffin. "Then let's begin," Father said as he put on his white vestment, the organist-vocalist began to play and sing, and our small group processed into the empty church.

I had chosen the hymns and readings except for the *Panis Angelicus*, which my sister selected because it had been sung at her first Communion. We took our places, and Rich's siblings read the comforting words of Scripture and tried to fight back tears. I had been to many funerals, but I found none so difficult as this one. The priest's homily was about God's fatherly mercy and unconditional love for Rich, who was now at home with God. We received the Eucharist as Jesus' uniting himself to us in our numbing grief.

Finally, as the music began for the final farewell, we prayed that the angels would welcome Rich into paradise. The next moment surprised us all. Instead of doing it himself, Father invited my sister to take the censor and walk around the casket, incensing the body. She moved with grace in the cloud of fragrance. Then my brother-in-law, niece and nephew followed in a kind of healing choreography of prayer.

Then Father said, "You offer the incense of our loving and prayers rising up to God and God sends down to you the assurance that Rich is with his heavenly fa-

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ther, lovingly returning his prayers for you.”

“As I watched the incense of prayer rising around me,” Joan said later, “I experienced for the first time a closeness to Richard and a touch of peace.”

We accompanied the casket to a family burial plot, where the priest again prayed for Richard and for everyone laid to rest in that cemetery. Mimi brought up a bouquet of 12 white roses from her two little boys, who were Uncle Rich’s favorites, and asked that the flowers be buried with him.

My sister asked, “Do you pray that way at each funeral?” Father assured her that every time he came, he would be praying also for Richard.

Instead of hurrying away, this man, who is in charge of three parishes, accepted the invitation to eat lunch with us at a nearby restaurant. He put everyone at ease and even had Richard’s parents smiling and talking as if they were old friends.

Despite very difficult times adjusting to the loss of Richard since the first shocking news, one memory above all sustains me: that of the tall young monsignor sent like an archangel to bring good news and healing to my family in deep grief. He gave us an experience of resurrection.



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“LA DEPRESIÓN”

by Deacon Ray Ortega

La depresión es la enfermedad que ha sido catalogada como la enfermedad del Siglo XXI. Es asombrosa la cantidad de personas que están afectadas por la misma. Según las estadísticas más de un 20% de la población mundial padece de depresión. Quizás, en estos momentos tú o alguien que tú conoces se encuentre batallando contra la depresión. Es una enfermedad muy seria y triste, y para vencerla hay que asimilar bien los golpes de la vida, sabiendo que algunos son inevitables, ya que en la vida todo es lucha y superación. La depresión en la mayoría de los casos suele presentar síntomas visibles y otros que no son tan visibles. Entre los visibles se encuentran la soledad, la ansiedad, la angustia, el cansancio, la facilidad para llorar, la tristeza, el aislamiento y los trastornos en el sueño. Entre los menos visibles se encuentran la falta de concentración, la culpabilidad, la falta de sentido en la vida y los pensamientos suicidas. Es muy común que la persona que está sufriendo de depresión no pida ayuda porque cree que su problema no tiene solución. A lo mejor piensa que no existe una salida para su vida, o a lo mejor que es imposible liberarse de la depresión. Pero no es así, porque Jesús en

el Evangelio de San Marcos, Capítulo 10, Versículo 27 dice lo siguiente: “Para los hombres es imposible, mas para Dios, no; porque todas las cosas son posibles para Dios. Entonces, podemos preguntarnos: Es posible liberarse de la depresión?. Existe realmente una solución?. Por supuesto que sí, la solución es Jesucristo. Jesús que llevó nuestras enfermedades y sufrió nuestros dolores. Jesús que nos ofrece una vida llena de propósitos y sentido. Jesús que en el Evangelio de San Juan, Capítulo 7, Versículo 38 nos dice: “Como dice la Escritura, del corazón del que cree en mí brotarán ríos de agua viva”. Abramos nuestro corazón al Señor.

God Bless you.



Deacon Ray Ortega was ordained in 1979 for the Archdiocese of Miami. He is a certified Pastoral Bereavement Specialist from the World Pastoral Care Center and a member of the South Florida Chapter of ADEC. He is Master of Ceremonies for the Auxiliary Bishop, the Most Rev. Felipe de Jesus Estevez. Ray currently serves on the

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