

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Remembering Mary

Every parish has its familiar fixtures: the windows, the statues, the shrines, the candles. Here, we also had a determined little woman with a delicate Irish brogue and a world-weary smile: Mary Newman.

She was a force of nature. Mary was unquestionably the most determined and tireless fundraiser the parish has ever known. Year after year, Sunday after Sunday, she could be spied near the entrance of the church with wads of sweepstakes and raffle tickets, selling chances to every imaginable church function. Not only that, she took her act on the road. People would tell me about seeing Mary in the Rockaways, or at bus stops, or in far-flung corners of Brooklyn, in her plain dress with her worn flat shoes, selling chances to anyone who paused long enough to ask what she was doing.

Incredibly, she never stopped. On one of her visits to her beloved Ireland, she made a pilgrimage to Knock and tried to sell raffle tickets to unsuspecting American tourists. A priest got wind of it and told her to stop. He jabbed a finger at her. "Are you even Catholic?" he asked her.

She assured him she was.

He glared at her. "Then recite the Nicene Creed."

And she did.

He told her to knock it off anyway.

It was hard not to notice her. How often did we hear her name mentioned from the pulpit: "Don't forget to buy chances from Mary Newman after Mass ...". She was ubiquitous. You'd see her in the pews every Sunday and holy day without fail, often at multiple Masses. The parish, I think, gave her purpose and peace. But her heart yearned to go home, to Ireland. She spoke of it often, wanting to go back for good.

A couple weeks ago, Mary was diagnosed with terminal cancer. She quickly rallied and expressed, once again, a desire to go home. And she did. Mary returned to Ireland on November 1—and went home to the Father two days later. She was 87.

Fittingly, she completed her earthly journey in the shadow of the feasts honoring All Saints and All Souls, and on the day we commemorate St. Martin de Porres—the

Dominican priest whose life, like Mary's, was devoted simply and totally to charity and the church.

Many people who encountered Mary over the years were surprised to discover that she wasn't a nun. Her simplicity, her humility, her gentle strength and determination, like the weathered lines on her face and the sad smile in her eyes, spoke of a past that remained to most of us largely a mystery. As far as I know, she never married. People were at a loss to explain what she had done before she showed up at our church.

In many ways, I think, she was a living icon of another time and place—when every Irish family had a daughter named Mary and a nephew or cousin who was a priest, and when a convent-educated young lady wouldn't leave the house without a rosary and a chapel veil tucked inside her purse. For generations, these were the women who ran large households in cramped spaces. They literally kept the faith. They raised sons to be priests, ironed altar linens, hosted church suppers, answered the rectory phone and made sure their children made it to confession every Saturday and Mass every Sunday. They taught toddlers their prayers, lit candles during Advent, fried fish on Fridays, fingered rosary beads during sudden thunderstorms and never went to bed without whispering a prayer and touching the crucifix that hung over the dresser. My grandmother—another Mary, from Slovakia—was one of these women. Mary Newman in many ways reminded me of her.

In her later years, as her health weakened, she needed a cane. She traveled less and stayed closer to home. But her bag always carried chances, waiting to be sold. That, I think, was Mary's legacy, and her gift to us.

She was a blessed reminder that life is full of risks. Have faith. Trust God. And every now and then, take a chance.

Better yet: buy one after Mass from Mary Newman.

Thank you, Mary. God bless you.

Requiescat in pace.

Eternal rest grant unto her, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon her. May her soul and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.

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