

A Hopeful Tremor of the Heart

The Ignatian Pilgrimage held an experience for me that I couldn't expect. I departed the States knowing that my mother's death was imminent. After suffering a stroke, her will to live had left her. She lay helpless and sightless in a nursing home bed, all white and quiet, as if waiting.

Waiting

I'll break it down so this waiting can be understood. She wasn't waiting for me or my brother. We took turns traveling back to the Pittsburgh nursing home to visit her so one of us would be with her bimonthly to monitor her progress (how naïve we were to think there could be progress, or, rather, not to understand what progress meant at the end of life). Our prodigal sister and her eldest daughter, my mother's favorite grandchild, were moved by my terse plea that they visit with her before it was too late. Irony required that they appear unannounced the same weekend that her three other grandchildren, my daughters, traveled from afar to visit. Thus, she wasn't waiting for my sister or for her grandchildren to visit. Her great grandchildren also came, and she seemed to enjoy the music of their young voices. She also wasn't waiting for her devoted sisters to visit, for they lived locally and made it to the nursing home when they could get a ride with someone, usually Walt. She wasn't waiting for Walt, who started coming around a year after my father's death, which sent my sister into her fit of mortal wrath against our mother. Walt, however, had saved my mother from a premature entrance into the nursing world of the old and forgotten, los nuevos olvidados, where the final banner of this life sadly reads: Abandon all hope, ye who enter this extended care facility.

Pilgrimage

During the offertory of the private mass held in the Gesu apartment of the young saint, Luis Gonzaga, we pilgrims had the opportunity to announce a personal prayer. I offered a prayer for my mother, who, I said, was about to depart this life. The following day we were to visit the Vatican

galleries, leaving punctually at 9:00. Doubting that we could keep to a strict schedule, I arrived at 9:08 at our gathering place to discover that I was on my own. I decided to enjoy my freedom. By way of the Basilica of St. Paul's Outside the Walls, I made it slowly to those sumptuous galleries of the Vatican's palace of art, taking note for the first time of the several paintings of Loyola. How gorgeous the artists have made his visions! Borne of self-inflicted suffering and loneliness, ascending from grime into ghostly rapture! After completing my focused tour, I was attracted to a cue I had never seen before, leading to the Vatican grottoes where some of the popes rest. I drifted along until I got to the coffin of John Paul II in St. Peter's crypt. A young woman was on her knees weeping in the middle of the walkway. I thought of John Paul's comments on the dignity that Christ had given to suffering. I remembered my mother. The next stop was the tomb of St Peter. Like Doubting Thomas, I was stunned into belief by physical reality. Here were the remains of a human being who had known Christ! I felt a surge and then a tremor in my chest. (At my age, one is attentive to events in the chest.) After the tremor passed, I didn't know what or how to think about it. I moved on, drawn to a religious bookstore on the perimeter of Vatican plaza, where I found so many books now of interest that I bought none. We returned to the States the next day.

The End of Waiting and Pilgrimage

I learned that my mother had died the afternoon of the day I spent in the Vatican. She was alone at the time, but her sisters and Walt had visited with her late that morning. At her wake, they reported independently that she was behaving weirdly that morning. She was beaming, and looked as if she were seeing something with her sightless eyes. Walt said he asked her, "Helen, Are you all right?" "Yeah," she responded with a weak voice. My pilgrimage ended restfully at her grave.