

Gospel: John 6:51-58

Jesus said to the crowds:
"I am the living bread that came down from heaven;
whoever eats this bread will live forever;
and the bread that I will give
is my flesh for the life of the world."

The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying,
"How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"
Jesus said to them,
"Amen, amen, I say to you,
unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood,
you do not have life within you.
Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood
has eternal life,
and I will raise him on the last day.
For my flesh is true food,
and my blood is true drink.
Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood
remains in me and I in him.
Just as the living Father sent me
and I have life because of the Father,
so also the one who feeds on me
will have life because of me.
This is the bread that came down from heaven.
Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died,
whoever eats this bread will live forever."

Homily: *Remembering Nancy Kern*, past President of Heart to Heart and devoted wife, mother, grandmother, and friend of Heart to Heart.

We gather this evening not by accident. Nancy knew that her death was coming and she thought carefully about how she wanted these ceremonies to unfold. She talked with her pastor Fr. Dan and Dan said, "Well, we do funerals two ways here at Blessed Sacrament. We do them in the morning or we can do them in the evening." Nancy thought about that a while and she said, "The visitation is before the mass in the morning? I don't want to get up that early." So by her choice, we gather this evening.

These readings were selected by the family because they speak to Nancy's faith and Nancy's values. It's appropriate that the Gospel today is taken from John chapter 6, it's called the Bread of Life Discourse, here at Blessed Sacrament Church. Jesus talks about the nature of Eucharist, about the Blessed Sacrament and what that means. And I suggest, and I'd like to structure my reflections on Nancy's life on the Eucharist in three different dimensions: the Sacramental dimension, the Communal--or the Ecclesial dimension--and the Mystical.

The Sacramental dimension. There's no place more clear in the Scripture that undergirds Catholic theology of what we believe Eucharist to be, than this sixth chapter from John's Gospel. Where Jesus says, "I am this living bread," and we Catholics believe that under the appearance of bread and wine Jesus comes to us Sacramentally; He gives us His very self to be strengthened. This truth was an essential core faith belief for Nancy. Most of you probably know that she wasn't born Catholic. After meeting Mike and studying the faith she converted to Catholicism. One of the things that drew her to the Catholic faith was this belief in the true presence of Jesus within the Eucharist.

This wasn't some peripheral doctrine. This was core to Nancy's understanding of how Jesus feeds us; Jesus strengthens us in this Holy Sacrament. Indeed, the word Eucharist is a Greek word meaning *thanksgiving*. Nancy lived her life filled with thanksgiving for the blessings that God had given to her.

The last time I was able to visit with Nancy was just a few days—the Sunday—before she died. She died early on Wednesday morning. On that Sunday before, I was in town. I live in Chicago, but I've lived in Cincinnati for many years. I came back to visit, and it was just Mike and I, and we came to Nancy and at that point she was bedridden. She hadn't been out of bed for many weeks. She was fairly non-responsive. She opened and blinked her eyes, but I'm not sure she recognized me. She certainly couldn't say anything at that point.

Mike and I prayed silently at her side. And I had brought Holy Communion, I had brought the Eucharist with me. I said, "Mike, do you think Nancy will be able to receive a sliver of the host?" And he said, "I think she can." So, I held that host before Nancy, and I had been there about an hour praying and talking and conversing with Mike, and I said, "The Body of Christ." Nancy opened her eyes, looked directly at me, and said in a loud and clear voice, "Amen." The only words that she would speak the entire time I was there, for two hours.

Even in the end, Nancy's faith and that abiding presence of Jesus within the Eucharist, was undiminished. The Sacramental dimension of the Body of Christ.

There's a second dimension, and we might call it the Communal dimension or the Ecclesial dimension, of this mystery. And that's that Jesus looks upon us as members of His Body, especially those who believe in Him, but indeed all of humanity. Jesus claims every human being as members of His Body—whatever you do for the least of My brothers or sisters, you do for Me.

Nancy embraced that reality. And her family was not just the family, her family was the Body of Christ and that's where her faith was lived out, in her primary vocation as wife and mother. She was a strong woman. She had deep roots. She was raised well. I was talking to her brother Butch just earlier today and Butch told me the story that, Nancy was no little flower of a young girl. She came in one day and the side of her face was cut and there was dirt on her cheeks and her father said, "What happened?" She said, "Well, I was in a fight." And her father turned to Butch, her older brother, and said, "Why didn't you protect your sister?" And he said, "Dad, she was winning the fight."

That strength that Nancy embodied as a young girl was there for her children, for her husband, for her family, for her grandchildren. Nancy was there for her kids. There for all of the lessons in dancing and singing and acting and sports and education. Nancy was there advocating for her kids; Mike was shocked—and you can read that story in the program—that Mike was shocked when Nancy took Erin (as a youngster) to Playhouse in The Park, to audition for a role. And she was there advocating for Kevin when he got his first starring role at age six; it would eventually lead him to Broadway. And she was there advocating for Joey, writing his scripts and encouraging him in his rewrites. She was there for her children.

Joey told me a couple of hours ago that one of the lessons he'll never forget was his mother taught him the importance of loving his children. That love wasn't just something on the lips, Nancy loved her children and her grandchildren individually one-on-one. She went out of her way to discover what they liked and part of what was so beautiful for these grandchildren was spending one-on-one time with Nana. Theo loved arcade games. Video games were not exactly Nancy's cup of tea, but because her grandson Theo liked that, she investigated arcades in the West Chester area and took Theo to an arcade. She had a special dinner lined up with Lila to go to Bob Evans for a special treat; a dinner out with grandma. And I love this story, some of the grandchildren would be treated to a special treat of a sleepover with grandma, which meant that grandpa got kicked out of the bed so that the grandchildren could sleep with grandma. Through text messages, through FaceTime, she went out of her way to stay in contact not just with the grandchildren here in Cincinnati, but those in New York and those out in LA.

She loved them individually, personally, just as she loved us. Her heart was broken—as the hearts of so many of the people here at Blessed Sacrament were broken—when Erin's husband Kevin died last January. That was Nancy's great fear, in facing death, because she wanted so much to live, to be able to be there for the sake of her children and grandchildren. It's not by accident that she's named as one of the two memorials, giving to the Team Timmbering Educational Fund to continue to provide for Erin and Kevin's children. That was central, but Nancy didn't just love her own biological family, she loved her faith family: the people here at Blessed Sacrament parish; the people at St. Maximilian Kolby; her faith lady friends. She was involved and she was committed to her church community. And I guess that's where I come in. She met a young priest by the name of Fr Jim Willig. His preaching energized her in a way that invited her to become committed. When Fr Jim eventually got cancer—and died from cancer—Nancy stepped up to continue his ministry.

I was eventually invited into that ministry as well. Nancy became President of Heart to Heart and helped that ministry to spread across the country through the radio, through the digitalization of Fr Jim's homilies, through the publications of books. She and her trusted companion, Sr Mary George, took the reins and jumped that ministry to a much higher level. It's the second memorial that Nancy named for gifts. On the little slips of paper, and I think Nancy would want me to mention this to you—because she was a woman who liked things just so—the website is actually not Heart *to* Heart, there's only one t, it's heart *o* heart.org. Right Nance?

There's a third dimension to why we gather here today, and it's the mystical dimension of Eucharist. And that is, when we face death, we are faced with inevitable questions of, *What next? What lies beyond the grave? What happens?* Nancy faced her death without any fear at all. She

knew deeply in our heart where she was headed. Fr Dan visited her just a few weeks before she died. He gave her the Sacramental Anointing, the sliver of Holy Communion. Again, she was non-responsive for much of that time. She had a hard time communicating, but at one time in the conversation she looked right at Fr Dan and she said, "Fr. Dan I have an appointment with Jesus." She knew where she was headed.

If there was any fear, if there was a difficulty in the fourteen months from when she was diagnosed with terminal cancer to when the Lord eventually took her home, it was her concern for her husband, for her children and especially her grandchildren. She very much wanted to live to be able to see them grow. In those fourteen months she began to understand that God had a bigger plan, that Nancy would be taken into the mystical Body of Christ, that indeed Nancy would be forever united with Jesus; not just in a temporal way, but in a mystical, eternal way.

These words that we hear from Jesus, "Whoever eats this bread will live forever in me." became the guideposts that strengthened Nancy. Indeed, as we gather this is a day of lamentation. The sadness that grips our hearts is inevitable and so the first reading from the Book of Lamentation says, "...that my soul is deprived of peace. I've forgotten what happiness is." We know that sadness, but that reading goes on and says, "...and yet the mercies of the Lord are renewed each day." Nancy was a woman of hope. She wants that hope to be here. Her family wants that hope to be here. They look upon this day as a day of celebration, not so much a day of lamentation and mourning, but truly as a day of Eucharist and thanksgiving for the extraordinary life of this holy woman. As we read in Paul's second letter to the Romans, again selected by the family, "Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ." We believe in faith as Nancy believed in faith, that now there is no barrier, that now Nancy is one with our God, eternally united. And if she is one with God, then she is there as our advocate, as our friend; from her place in heaven praying for us, and with us.

Make no mistake about it, as her grandchildren grow, Nancy will be there smiling and praying and advocating. As one more role on Broadway and one more movie is produced, Nancy will be there advocating, celebrating. For nothing can separate us from the love of God. We believe in faith that Nancy lives with God, therefore Nancy lives with us in every prayer that is uttered.

Amen. (Amen.)