

Funeral Homily

given by Fr. Bernard Geiger, OFM Conv.

Your Excellency Bishop Sheldon and Bishop Foys, Reverend Monsignors, Fathers, Deacon Randy, venerable brothers, sisters, members of the Catholic Corps, and beloved family and friends of Gwen Coniker,

“The souls of the just are in the hand of God and no torment shall touch them.” These are the opening words of today’s funeral Mass that we just heard. How actually they express the faith that sustains all of you Conikers on this bittersweet day. You yourselves chose this reading from the book of Wisdom for this Mass. For you rightly perceive Gwen as the just and valiant woman who was your spouse, your mother, your sister, your grandmother.

We can see exactly how just and valiant Gwen was in the words she herself wrote some ten years ago for *Challenge and Change*, Fr. Peter Lappin’s book on the early history of the Apostolate for Family Consecration back in 1975. Gwen’s life was in grave danger. Her doctor had warned her not to have any more children for he was convinced she would not survive another birth. But here was Gwen, pregnant again, this time with Theresa Marie. For *Challenge and Change*, Gwen wrote these words, “the doctor insisted that he was very concerned for my life. He felt that I was being foolish not to consider the children that I already had and that it was dangerous to think of another pregnancy. So when the eleventh pregnancy came, I went to see the doctor. He almost did not take me in as a patient. He was just too afraid. ‘Let’s not worry,’ I said. ‘Let’s take it a day at a time, and I’m sure everything will work out.’ I just knew that no one knew better than God Himself. He allowed this pregnancy, and I had to remain firm in my beliefs. So this birth was frightening since the doctor had made it so. But I couldn’t consider an abortion.”

It was at the time of this pregnancy in 1975 that Gwen had written her famous Christmas letter to her family. She went on to explain why she did so with the words, “I wrote this little message to the family thinking that if I was not with them at Christmas time, they would have a little thought of mine they could share with one another, and in case I died, they wouldn’t hold it against the baby.”

As I pondered what to say today, I turned to Gwen and the Holy Spirit and said, “Gwen, this is your Mass, you always wanted me to keep my homilies short, so now you have to tell me what you want me to say.” What came to me was a concise Christian vision of life. I think Gwen wants to leave you as her special heritage, her last words to you, the family, that Michael recorded for you before she died. Gwen said, “Everyone is special. The one who is most special is your dad, my husband. It’s been a real step of faith.”

These words are the key to Gwen’s vision of life. A vision she wants each of you to have too. Gwen saw the precious goodness of God in each of you, her family. This vision was God’s gift to her through the Holy Spirit’s gifts of knowledge, understanding, and piety. These gifts and all the gifts are given to all of us in the sacrament of Baptism. They are in us as channels, as capacities for receiving and using divine Light and the light they bring us does not come to us automatically, however, at least in the amount we need to receive all that we need. We must ask for it in prayer. Gwen obviously did ask for it in prayer, and God gave it to her in abundance. And so she came to

see how precious each one of you is in God's eyes. But, it's not enough to receive that Light, we must respond to it in faith. And that is why Gwen said, "It's been a real step of faith."

She believed in you. She believed in your goodness, and she wants you to believe in your goodness, too, your own and each others. When you believe in someone's goodness, you treat that person with respect, with reverence. And as we come to understand one another in God's plan for us better, the more we become willing to commit ourselves to fulfilling God's plans for us, both for ourselves and for each other. That commitment is the core of Christian hope. For Christian hope is reaching out to God and to what he is calling us to. Trusting that He will enable us to fulfill His plans for us.

This to me explains that exquisite respect and trusting regard Gwen had for each of us, which always made us feel important and treasured. We knew that she wanted what was best for us and was always ready to help us in every way she could. The Catholic Corps men and women tell me they could always call on Gwen for help. She would tell them "come on over, we'll talk." She was and is the real mother of everyone here at Catholic Familyland.

Gwen also had that vision of piety that sees everyone, especially her family and children, as someone bonded to her in close relationship. If you weren't in her immediate family, you felt that you were a spiritual brother or sister or son or daughter in her extended family. You felt accepted, treasured, and loved.

Brothers and sisters in Jesus, Mary and Joseph, this is, I believe, what Gwen wants to leave to you as her special heritage, that you ask the Holy Spirit daily, and even several times a day, for the Light of his gifts, so that you can have God's vision of Him and of yourselves and of one another, and to ask for the power of the infused virtues, so that you can believe strongly in God's goodness, so that you can believe that His goodness is in you, and that it is in each of us. She wants you to have the humble, down-to-earth self respect that she had and the exquisite respect for each other that she has had for each of you. A respect and reverence that translated into an unflinching daily personal commitment, a warm, generous love and self-giving and practical service that marked her whole life.

Gwen, we will never forget you, we'll always love you. We ask you never to forget us, to help us with your prayers, to do all that God is calling us to do. In these past days, weeks, and months, a deep mystery has been unfolding. I wish I had the knowledge, the understanding, and the time to do it justice.

And Gwen, I hope this homily isn't too long, I tried to make it shorter, I really did.