

Notes By The Way - November 1945

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Deeply personal account of being with her dying mother. Includes prayers and meditations on death and dying. Prays to the Little Flower for her mother. Evidence of answered prayer came in a variety of roses from different sources. (DDLW #461).

My soul hath thirsted after the strong living God; when shall I come and appear before the face of God?"

But the psalmist also says, "In death there is no one that is mindful of thee." So it made me happy that I could be with my mother the last few weeks of her life, and for the last ten days at her bedside daily and hourly. Sometimes I thought to myself that it was like being present at a birth to sit by a dying person and see their intentness on what is happening to them. It almost seems that one is absorbed in a struggle, a fearful, grim, physical struggle, to breathe, to swallow, to live. And so, I kept thinking to myself, how necessary it is for one of their loved ones to be beside them, to pray for them, to offer up prayers for them unceasingly, as well as to do all those little offices one can. When my daughter was a little tiny girl, she said to me once, "When I get to be a great big woman and you are a little tiny girl, I'll take care of you," and I thought of that when I had to feed my mother by the spoonful and urge her to eat her custard. How good God was to me, to let me be there. I had prayed so constantly that I would be beside her when she died; for years, I had offered up that prayer. And God granted it quite literally. I was there, holding her hand, and she just turned her head and sighed. That was her last breath, that little sigh: and her hand was warm in mine for a long time after.

It was hard to talk about dying, but every now and then we did. But I told her that we could no more imagine the life beyond the grave than a blind man could imagine colors. We talked about faith, and how we could go just so far in our reasoned belief, and that our knowledge was like a bridge which came to an end, so that it did not reach the other shore. A wonderful prayer that one, "I believe, oh God. Help Thou mine unbelief."

The beautiful flowers around her bedside were like a gorgeous promise of the new life to come. In winter everything seems so dead, the ground, the trees and all the shrubbery around the house, and then in a few short months, things begin to stir, palpably, and life bursts forth again. Mother had seen seventy-five autumns. Seventy-five times had she seen those promises fulfilled.

"Life is changed, not taken away."

“...In Him there hath shone forth upon us the hope of a happy resurrection, so that we, saddened by knowing that we must one day die, are comforted by the promise of immortal life to come. From Thy faithful, O Lord, life is not taken away; it is but changed, for when their dwelling place in this earthly exile shall have been destroyed, there awaiteth them an everlasting home in Heaven.”

“But some man will say: How do the dead rise again? Or with what manner of body shall they come? Senseless man, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die first. And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not the body that shall be; but bare grain, as of wheat.”

These were comforting things to talk about and to think about, those all too short afternoons by mother’s bedside. Outside, the maple trees blazed, cast their leaves about them and stood gaunt and clean against the sky. Asters and chrysanthemums still bloomed in the garden.

One morning I prayed to the Little Flower, whose picture is over the foot of my bed, that she would especially look after my mother. I reminded her of her own grief at her father’s long dying. That night Julia Porcelli brought me in some dried blessed roses. The next day, a friend brought a tiny bouquet with lace paper about it made up of roses and carnations, and my mother greeted it with a smile and held it in her hands a few times that afternoon. And it was that evening that she died, so quietly, so gently, saying but a few moments before to my brother, “Kiss me goodnight and run along, because I want to go to sleep.”

A week later when I went to Poughkeepsie to visit my three aunts, one of whom is a Catholic, and to go with them to offer up a Mass of thanksgiving for my mother’s most peaceful death, we came out of St. Peter’s church that misty morning to be greeted by a brilliant rose in the garden next to the Church. And when we arrived home for breakfast, there was a bouquet telegraphed to us from Florida and in the center of the fall flowers were two lovely roses. The little Flower was prompt and generous indeed in her message.

I write the account because I like to show my gratitude by telling others of such favors. Perhaps, too, it may comfort others who have sore and lonely hearts over the approaching death of a near one. “Life is changed, not taken away,” and what a glorious change in these sad times, after a long and valiant life.

“Look down with favor, we beseech Thee, O Lord, upon the offering we make for the soul of Grace, thy servant; from heaven send healing to it, and bid it rest in the certainty of Thy love.”

“O Lord, the God of mercies, grant to the soul of Thy hand-maid a place of solace, of peaceful rest and of glorious light.”