

Homily by Fr. Paul Landolfi SM
Memorial for Jean Canning
April 12, 2005 – St. Paul's Church, Princeton, NJ

Dear Dick, Paul, Sheila, Denise, Jerry, Mike, Eileen, Dan, and Theresa, your families, your children, and all your extended family,

The deepest sympathies of the priests and people of St. Paul's parish, of all the Marianist Associates and Religious, of all your friends and co-workers, of the health care professionals in the hospice program, and all who are gathered here to pray for Jean, - your wife, your mother, and your friend.

About a month ago, when Jean was noticeably failing but still fighting, (She still had so much she wanted to accomplish), the family prepared a celebration of life. Isn't this a beautiful concept! While a person is still alive and conscious how good to celebrate the life you have lived together all these years. The family was able to do this. All the children were home. Jean consciously participated. It was a very important moment for the family. Jean chose this passage which was our first reading:

My soul is deprived of peace, I have forgotten what happiness is; I tell myself, my future is lost, all that I hoped for from the Lord...Remembering it over and over leaves my soul downcast within me. But I will call this to mind, as my reason to have hope:

The favors of the Lord are not exhausted, His mercies are not spent; they are renewed each morning, so great is His faithfulness. My portion is the Lord, says my soul; therefore will I hope in Him. Good is the Lord to one who waits for Him, to the soul that seeks Him. It is good to hope in silence for the saving help of the Lord.

Jean experienced these conflicting emotions which accompany suffering at the same time that we hold on to hope for eternal life. I always sensed a restlessness in Jean. It was the restlessness of a person who wants to get things done, of persons who know what they are looking for. I do not know her whole story, but what I do know tells me that she was restless to obtain a goal. Call it by other names perhaps, but her goal was God. She had committed herself to follow Jesus in a Marianist way of life and she still had work to do. Jean quietly struggled with her illness to find meaning in this and strength. She wanted to continue her life and work.

These past few weeks, as we considered the lives of Terry Schiavo and Pope John Paul II gradually ending, and as we saw Jean slowly ebbing away, we hopefully came to the conviction that every life is important. Every life tells a story. Jean's story began with the God who thought of her before the creation of the world. God meant this for each one of us. This act of God's immense love launches us into existence and remains with us throughout our lives. God loves us freely, that is, God loves us for no reason at all except that He loves us and wants us to be. What we have celebrated these last few weeks recalling the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus is our conviction that God never stops loving and caring for us. Even when we didn't deserve it, God sent His Son, born of the Virgin Mary, to save us. God wants us so much to be part of His Family.

Perhaps that is the key word today—*family*. Dick and Jean raised their children in the

spirit of God, following them through sickness and health, through difficulty and success, through good times and hard times. They built a very close and creative family. I was privileged to celebrate Mass for the family on Dick and Jean's 40th anniversary of marriage. It was a joy to see their exultant faces when the children presented their anniversary gift in a huge box. Dick and Jean opened it to find Danny, their son, who was not expected to be present because he was in South America. They were totally surprised and elated. Multiply these events many times and you get the picture of a family that loves each other, supports each other, and defends each other if need be. It was Dick and Jean that molded this family. Each of the children has their own story to tell.

Each of us also can examine our own story and know that we are special. God's personal love for us is the basis of our human dignity. Yet, none of us knows in what circumstances our lives will evolve, but we are confident of one thing. God is faithful to His promises. God never takes back His love. God will be with us at every moment of our life, and especially at the moment of our death. How true this was for Jean. She was not wrong: *The favors of the Lord are not exhausted, His mercies are not spent; they are renewed each morning, so great is His faithfulness.*

How Jean and Dick heard about the Cape May Pt. Family program, I do not know, but when they did, they immediately saw this could be a blessing for their family. She had been a creative teacher. She had even started her own company, "*Jersey Kids on the Block*", a federally funded educational program using adult size puppets to help disabled persons obtain a sense of personal dignity and convince them they were able to learn. They found this same spirit of equality at the Cape. Later as a dedicated Marianist Associate, Jean became a member of the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative, working especially in the Anti-Racism group. She sought respect and acceptance for all people. The family even accepted one of the boys from St. John's into their family. Her work in the *Kids on the Block* program had led her into social issues, especially those of abused persons. Her contact with so much suffering helped her appreciate the words of St. Paul to the Romans.

We know that affliction makes for endurance, and endurance for tested virtue, and tested virtue for hope. And this hope will not leave us disappointed, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Her restlessness was really her hope -, as the Catholic Catechism puts it: hope = *the confident expectation of divine blessings and the beatific vision.*

Dick & Jean were one of the first families to come to the Cape May Family program. Finding it so beneficial to their family, they later became a host family in 1972. Twenty-five years ago, in 1980, Dick and Jean became Marianist Associates, i.e., they consecrated themselves to Mary so that they might become more like Jesus and they promised to help Mary bring Her Son, the Risen Jesus, to their world.

Vatican II had inspired many lay Catholics to go deeper into their faith. Dick & Jean, like many other lay persons, did much in their parish to learn about the teachings of Vatican II and to discover the implications for their family and professional lives. The Family Retreat Center helped them concretize and synthesize many of these key ideas. Jean and Dick were active members of the Marianist Associates. Their families built up such strong bonds with each other. I remember the Open House they sponsored each Friday after Thanksgiving for years when fellow

Associates and their families would gather at the Canning home. What a support this was for the Christian life.

As Marianist Lay groups developed throughout the country, Jean became more and more involved. She was elected to leadership and headed strategic planning for the National Office of Marianist Lay communities. This was her cup of tea – to be in the middle of dynamic programs and groups that were really making a difference for a better world. Eventually, she was one of two elected by the lay members to the Marianist Family Council of North America. This Council is composed of the Provincials and Assistant Provincials of the Society of Mary and the Daughters of Mary, and two leaders of the Marianist Lay Network, which includes all the Marianist Lay Groups. Listen to the introduction of one of the first letters coming from this group. You know she had a voice in this.

We the members of the Marianist Family Council of North America, submit to all the members of the Marianist Family an opportunity to take up a common action in support of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In this year, when we celebrate in our Church, the year of the Eucharist, we invite members of the family to reflect on one of the meanings of our sharing in the one bread and the one cup. In the First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul insists that the Eucharist calls us to eliminate divisions among us. Therefore we invite all to make a pledge to eliminate racism and welcome the gifts of other cultures.

In this beautiful Year of the Eucharist, the family chose this passage from John as our Gospel. After all doesn't it sum up our lives? Doesn't it tell us what Jean really hoped for in this life?

Jesus explained to them: "I myself am the Bread of Life. No one who comes to Me shall ever be hungry, no one who believes in Me shall ever thirst. But as I told you, though you have seen Me, you still do not believe. All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me; no one who comes will I ever reject, because it is not to do my own will that I have come down from heaven, but to do the will of Him who sent Me. It is the will of Him who sent Me that I should lose nothing of what He has given me: rather, that I should raise it up on the last day.

Jean desired eternal life. Jean could look back on her life and that of her family and give thanks to God for all his blessings. Her restlessness now is over. She is at peace. She is in the heart of her God, the God Who loved her from the beginning, Who shed upon her the blessings of such a beautiful family, Who led her to the Family of Mary, and Who now gives her eternal peace in the Family of God. She can truly repeat St. Paul's words:

Now that we have been justified by faith, we are at peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Him we have gained access by faith to the grace in which we now stand, and we boast of our hope for the glory of God.

May God grant her eternal rest. May God bless us all. Amen