

Eulogy for Mom

– Delivered by Martin Sweeney, December 2, 2017, St. Malachi Church; Cleveland, Ohio

Actually, I didn't expect this. I'm the one in Southern California, not here in Cleveland, I'm the one who missed all those baptisms, First Communion, birthdays, St. Patrick's Day parties, I even missed a few weddings along the way. But most of all I wasn't here for all the extraordinary care given so lovingly to our Mother for all these last several years by my brothers and sisters. With a family of 13 you'd think managing, coordinating and making daily decisions about Mom's health for well over a decade would have led to many a difference of opinion but, if anything, Mom's care bound us even more tightly as a family.

For more than a few years our family—those here in Cleveland and those living out of town—have met every few months via Skype and video-conferencing. While it's more than a little amusing watching one another troubleshoot our respective technologies, still we somehow made it work: updates, medical reports, financial spreadsheets, staffing, sharing and for the most part consensus. No words can adequately express the enormous gratitude and love for all of you here who gave Mom so much love and care these past several years.

So I didn't anticipate being the one to deliver Mom's eulogy but here I am deeply honored and humbled to share a few thoughts about our Mother, your Grandmother, your Great-Grandmother, your Mother-in-law, your Aunt and your friend Pat Sweeney.

So many stories—every family is a book and every book has its chapters and Mom's book has finally come to an end, but oh my the stories not to mention all the different versions told over the years.

Now with the Sweeney family—with 13 children—the timeline is long and divided. My brother Bob was out the door to college when Catherine was just coming into this world. There were the *Big Boys* and then some more boys and a girl, followed by some more girls and a boy. There were at least three separate eras and no one of us were around for all of them. So, each of us is a chapter in Mom's story.

What I have to share are *my* memories and yet I hope they come close enough to your stories so you will all recognize the Pat Sweeney and the person you knew and loved.

Family

Let's start with the first chapter. The first story is a story of family. Mom had many stories and one of the most powerful and fateful stories was the Orphan Story. Somewhere I heard the story that Mom was actually born at Fr. Baker's Shrine of Our Lady of Victory in Lackawanna, New York. Now I'm not sure whether she was actually born at the orphanage but Fr. Baker's was pretty much home for a good number of those early years.

Mom bounced through a few foster families and then the story goes that somewhere in Cleveland, Ohio there was a couple—Paddy and Pearl Barrett who had just lost their only child, Catherine, at the age of 12. The version I heard was that Catherine's dying wish was for her father to adopt a daughter. Imagine a request from one's dying child. And the story continues with Patrick Barrett at Fr. Baker's picking one of the young girls who looked most in need, Mary Alice Bryant, soon to become Patricia Florian Barrett.

What Grandpa might have missed was that his wife Pearl—our Grandma Barrett—was still very much lost in her grief. I've often wondered what that must have been like: Mom seeking a mother she never found and Grandma grieving the daughter she lost. And yet that relationship lasted well over 60 years to both their credit.

Born in 1924, Mom was ten at the depth of the Great Depression; at 20 she was a young woman when many of her generation were fighting World War II; and by the time she was 30, Mom had met the man of her dreams and already had four young boys and a home in Bay Village.

And then another child, and another, and yada-yada-yada—13 children.

So now Mom and Dad were raising their family and the only possible way to raise 13 children is with assembly line discipline and precision. Everybody had to learn the diaper/toilet drill and that peanut butter & jelly sandwiches are made in groups of a baker's dozen. That's one long bread board. In all that chaos there was really never any extra time for Mom, for Dad, for Mom & Dad, or for that matter any of us. Remarkably, we all survived, having been raised by one another as much as by Mom and Dad.

But as the story continues and as we all grew older and started our own lives and families, Mom found the time she never had when we were all so young and she seized that opportunity to know each of us with an attention she never could indulge before.

So Mom traveled, celebrated, skied, river-rafted, hiked, cycled, and swam a lifetime of adventures hopping from one son or daughter's home and lives to the next. Now it was possible for her to enjoy each one of us without the demands of being a mother to all of us. That was a choice. Mom could have been more self-absorbed but having *more* was never a big thing for her—not when she was young and not as she grew older. Her family—her children and her grandchildren—meant everything to her.

As that young girl at Fr. Baker's, as that foster child, as that adopted daughter, as that mother of 13, family attachments were deep and complex. That Mom was able to build relationships over her lifetime with her children and her grandchildren was extraordinary.

The Good Sport

Deena has always said, "Your mother is such a good sport." I know exactly what Deena means, my mother was one great sport. One story that comes to mind I call *The Mariachi Dance*. Mom was out visiting for Eva's college graduation and there were a number of siblings in town for the celebration. It was at the end of her visit and we were all together for a last night out. I suggested a local Mexican restaurant, El Cholo, in Pasadena. This was at the time when some of Mom's health concerns were just beginning to surface and we were all mindful of her comfort zone. Well, I picked the wrong restaurant. El Cholo is a popular spot and that night it was packed and loud. Not good for Mom. There must have been well over a dozen of us and I could tell almost immediately that it was going to be difficult for Mom to hear and track the conversation around the table. I could see the storm brewing.

And then I heard the music. I turned and spotted a Mariachi band serenading—table by table—circling closer and closer to our table. Mom quickly voiced her displeasure, complaining that it was now even harder for her to hear our conversations. Over the next several minutes, with the Mariachi band circling closer and closer, Mom continued her complaint but now with the threat that she was going to get up and tell them to just "shut-up." I think I turned to Dan and asked, "How many minutes more before she blows up?" The Mariachi band was now just a couple tables away. It was like watching a car crash in slow motion, just before the impact.

We all held our breath and then just as the band launched into one more ballad, there was Mom, jumping up, clapping and dancing with a small group of children from another table. It was a stunning reversal of emotion and participation. There was Mom leading a dance circle of children all with huge smiles on their faces including hers. Mom had the ability to throw herself into the moment even when you thought it might well go the other way.

Over the years ahead I am sure that we will all share similar stories that each of you experienced with Mom—the Great Sport.

Woman of Faith

Perhaps one of the most defining stories of Mom's life was her incredible, unwavering faith in God. If ever there was a woman of faith it would be Pat Sweeney. From her beginnings at Fr. Baker's throughout her sorrows and joys of a lifetime, her faith was always central.

Mom's faith could be found in her devotion to the Blessed Virgin, her trust in God and, spiritually, her love for nature. They were all pieces from the same cloth and if you spent anytime with our mother you would have witnessed her faith in God and her love for nature.

Her love for nature was constant—the lake, the park, a flower, a bird, a squirrel, or even just a broken branch along the road. This might be where I now see Mom the most. Taking walks with Mom over the years—as we all did— taught me to look closely and carefully at what lied just ahead or under foot. It was sort of a Zen thing and it always included her expression of gratitude for every day, every sunrise, every sunset. Nature rooted Mom. It was a relationship that didn't rely upon language, it was deeper, something steady and strong. And of course, for Mom nature was proof of the divine.

My mother and I shared a correspondence over the years and recently I went back to some of those letters and discovered a depth of thought and reflection I hadn't fully appreciated those many years ago. She would often share her love of nature, her own disappointments and joys, and most defining, her faith—open, comforting, spiritual and always grateful.

Let me share just a few excerpts from our correspondence:

My faith is why I am who I am today. I wish I were much better, even different. But I know I would have been much much worse without my belief in God's love for me. It's the source of my faith, hope and charity. I'm filled with the love of natural beauty which is always around us, and the love for my children. They fascinate me and keep me involved in this changing world. There is no room for bitterness. There are episodes of sadness, and experience of joy and always peace. That's what I want for you.

Mom wrote that she wished she was better, even different, and then she comes full circle in her deep gratitude and love for God, nature and her children. That was her birthday wish to me on my 40th birthday.

And, this remarkable and poetic narrative, written 35 years ago, that captures, I believe, the essence of Pat Sweeney. This was written during a very difficult and challenging period of Mom's life:

I drove Eileen's volleyball team to St. Joe's—my alma mater. I don't know if you were ever back on the grounds which overlooks the valley. Well, while the team was doing their warm-ups to blasting rock I took a stroll down memory lane. It looks just the same—which is much like our back yard only much bigger without swimming pool and buildings. Halfway between the school and my walk to the cliff I came upon something I never remembered—a small herd of deer about five or six. They raised their heads from grazing on some crab apples and I quietly observed them then we both continued our activity.

Then I decided to search out the grotto of Our Lady and St. Bernadette which had been abandoned after a rape took place there when the drug scene and violence culture escalated some 20 years or so ago. At one time there was a well-worn path half-way down the valley to this lovely life size replica. We had our May Crownings there, our October Rosaries and our retreats plus just plain walks on our own. It was never a short walk and it was well hidden, so it

was a real escape from the noise and activity above. Now there is a snow fence discouraging any casual traveler from the street. But the fallen limbs and the over grown foliage did not completely obliterate the path I knew had been there. And I found it! The grotto is still there sans the statues of course. The masonry is intact and it seems as mystifying in its spiritual direction as any religious experience. I sat on a rotting log, my feet in wet multi-colored leaves and I prayed. I was very happy there. I thought of the past, the present, and the future. Then I left a plastic rosary in the well where the statue of Our Lady had stood. I admit I felt foolish—like some naive pagan yet irresistibly I wanted to share some of the present with the past with an offering for the future. Some crow will probably use it for his nest in spring.

When I reached the cliff again the sun was beginning to set, the trees blazed in accompanying color, the river was a silver ribbon way below and I loved God.

The deer were still munching but as the sun dipped lower in the sky the one with the antlers looked up and as if on cue loped off to the valley followed a second later by the others with two little ones kind of holding back as if they couldn't understand why they had to go home so soon.

The image of Mom—wanting to share some of the present with the past with an offering for the future—is just so heartfelt, so beautiful and so Mom.

And lastly, appropriate today as we mourn our loss and celebrate her life, Mom wrote in sympathy to Deena after her father's death:

That's death—that you will feel an emotional emptiness in your heart. And hope that when life is through with all of us we will meet again in the light of love and eternity.

Our mother passed this life into another with our brother Ed by her side, eyes open, as Ed sang "...Blue skies smiling at me, nothing but blue skies do I see, blue days, all of them gone, nothing but blue skies from now on."

How wonderful and appropriate, Ed, that you were by Mom's side when she left us. The image of you serenading Mom to Irving Berlin makes all of this a bit easier and always comforting.

Mother of 13, grandma to 37, and great-grandmother to a new generation—that family count now runs to well over 60. We were all so blessed and today we gather to celebrate her life and pray for her everlasting peace.