

REQUIEM MASS FOR JOAN RAFFERTY ROBINS (NEE GODFREY)

Holy Trinity, Hethe

Thursday 14th April, 1994

THE ADDRESS

It is only seventeen weeks since many, perhaps most, of us met here after Mick's death. Now we have re-gathered for Joan. For the two of them I think we should be genuinely grateful for the shortness of this gap.

Their life together was so special - a relationship which cannot easily be captured in words, least of all by banal phrases about 'perfect couples', at which both of them would wince, audibly. One way of defining their marriage is as an animated conversation which lasted over half a century : a dialogue in which they never ran out of interesting things to say to one another, and, what is much more rare, of interest in listening to one another. A rather better way of putting it stems from the fact that marriage is the only sacrament which the recipients give one to the other, not once and for all but day in, day out. With the two of them, the external signs were always there to be seen: of Mick gentling Joan, and of Joan stimulating Mick. The inward grace was not far from the surface - an unobtrusive avowal which would often break through quite unselfconsciously. There was nothing at all strange for them to be digging or weeding the garden on a sunny day and, as the bells rang through the village at noon, pausing to say the Angelus together, as something natural to do and to be done very naturally, using normal voices and with earthy hands still holding their spades and trowels.

Yet this close relationship, far from erasing their individuality, seemed to enhance it. This is why it is impossible to speak of Joan simply as part of a couple. Certainly, married love helped to make her whole, but it was not the whole of her by any means.

The other part was that of a public person, and many of those present could supply much more detail about her career and voluntary work: as one of the earliest women executives in British Gas; as a pioneer television chef; as President of the National Council of Women; as co-founder of the Women Caring Trust for Northern Ireland; as someone whose last months and weeks were occupied with the granting of Arms to Deddington (to be presented on Saturday 16th April).

To put all these different *personae* together we would need to pool resources - from the two exceedingly complex extended families; from the wide network of friends which began to be spun in school-days seventy years ago; from the London family circle who remained Mick and Joan's faith-community alongside those from Hethe; and from all the new friends made during the two Deddington decades. Even then, we would still be learning.

Whom we would be learning about would be the public Joan, Joan Robins OBE. This award carried an unusual citation, namely "for furthering the cause of women in industry"; it was apposite because she really rejoiced in every one of our achievements as the next generation of women whom she wanted to see pulling into the mainstream.

Joan (the 'public' Joan) was immensely active in her professional and voluntary work. She relished every bit of the activity, from fund-raising amongst the Kennedy clan to those legendary lunches on the lawn, when buses would unload their women delegates from the Third World and the miracle of the meringues would be performed yet again. This 'public' Joan loved the spotlight, the limelight, the front stage and the high wire. She loved it and acknowledged this as part of herself, as a necessary, ineliminable side of her personality, and I won't deny or diminish its importance either.

Once, in the early days of feminism, we were talking over female saints as role-models. Joan immediately narrowed her list to three. "Well," she said (partly out of politeness to me and partly being true to her Scots background) "there's Queen Saint Margaret of Scotland, and I *do* wish they would use her correct title. Then Catherine, of course, was named after Catherine of Sienna" (I believe the 'of course' referred to saintly exertions to re-consolidate the Papacy). "And", she finished, "there is Jeanne d'Arc". Joan's own naming was utterly appropriate, because those two Joans had so many of the same qualities - bold, fiery, imperious even; unsentimental and undaunted; combative, crusading and committed. Both were dry-eyed and both complete strangers to self-pity.

Nevertheless, I think there was also a major difference between the two. If Jeanne heard her voices, I suspect that Joan was not at all of that contemplative temper. It is impossible ever to characterize another person's spirituality, precisely because their hidden life is hidden. However, there is a phrase which seems to epitomize it, although it is a phrase very bruised through being over-used and abused. She was quite simply 'a faithful daughter of the Church' - nourished by Her, praying through Her, and, above all, being illuminated by Her. From this Church, to whom I believe she was incapable of being unfaithful, came the resources of the private Joan, the non-combative Joan - rich in concern, in contrition, and yes, from such a strong personality, in obedience. She had that obedience which is necessary in order to be the first to say sorry, to forgive openly and

generously, to admit to having been hasty, and to offer a deep secluded pool of graciousness to those who would take from it.

On Easter Sunday I visited her in hospital for the last time and asked, "How is it now?" "Now," she said, "it's endurance". So, in obedience and wry humour, she endured. I love her too much to be other than thankful, that she did not have to endure infirmity, immobility, or indignity, all of which she would have detested.

Instead we, and I hope this for Catherine more than for anyone, can keep our mental pictures intact. These are pictures of a Joan who will always be a vibrant, a vital and (an adjective which is not used often perhaps because there are few occasions to use it with conviction) a valiant woman, one who indeed ran the race to the finish.

Margaret Jones  
14th April 1994