Opinion
Guest Voices



Jesuit Fr. Ron Schmidt presides over the burial of a friend of the Daughters of St. Paul community. (Sr. Rose Pacatte)



by Rose Pacatte

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Because we are a small community of six sisters and everyone is either traveling, on mission or otherwise occupied, I represented our community at the funeral Mass and burial of a dear friend and benefactor at Holy Cross Cemetery in Culver City, California, this morning.

I arrived a half-hour early and went to the wrong chapel (there are at least three at the cemetery and mortuary). A staff member told me the Mass would be at the Mausoleum Chapel in the other building (she pointed over the one where we were standing). On the other side I found the mausoleum, went inside and wandered to the left and to the right but found no chapel. I walked across the parking lot to the office and the receptionist in that very quiet place directed me to the Mausoleum Chapel. (Yes, this is what it is called. Not confusing at all.)

As an aside, another time when I was at Holy Cross for a funeral Mass in a chapel in one of the mausoleums (or a chapel with people buried in the walls; not sure which), I looked around and found myself sitting next to Ray Bolger and his wife, Gwendolyn. Bolger, you remember, played the scarecrow in 1939 film, "The Wizard of Oz."

Two staff members greeted me outside the chapel and told me, with smiles, that I was the first one there! And Mass was to start in 15 minutes. They disappeared, doing what staff members at a funeral chapel do. I looked behind me after signing the book, and there, all alone, was our longtime community friend, lying in his casket. It was such a lonely sight. Now it was just he and I. I prayed at his side for a few moments, touched his hand and went into the chapel.

As I sat in my pew, I realized that I was the designated mourner — standing in for our community and until others arrived, for family and friends as well. At eight minutes to the hour, I posted on Facebook my new status as the #designatedmourner. Lots of people replied almost right away: It had happened to them, too. One friend wrote, "But now you brought all of us to be with you." What a

lovely and consoling thought about how we are all connected.

As the clock was about to strike, 11 a.m., I heard noise in the vestibule. I turned and saw that people were gathering and that the family had arrived. The presider, who happened to be a Jesuit friend Ron Schmidt, had arrived, too, and was getting vested. The pianist went through a medley of the usual hymns until 11:15, when the service began in the door to the chapel and the gloved pallbearers accompanied the casket to its place in front of the altar and Mass began.

Trailer for "Coco," a film being released Nov. 22

Let me go back to yesterday afternoon because this feeds into my reverie. I was invited to the Disney lot in Burbank for a screening of "Coco," the new Disney-Pixar animated film about a family in the village of Santa Cecilia in Mexico. They are preparing to celebrate the *Día de los Muertos*. This annual celebration to assist the dead in their spiritual journey includes All Saints Day and All Souls Day on November 2 (with visual effects linked to what we in the U.S. know as Halloween.) The *ofrenda* in the home is ready with photos of the family members who have died, going back at least four or five generations. Now *Abuela* is preparing the food. Everyone is excited, especially Miguel, the youngest, and his parents who are expecting a baby. *Bisabuela*, the very elderly great-grandmother, rocks silently in her chair with a hint of a smile on her lips. Part of the celebration is to tell stories about the deceased and to visit the cemetery to bring their favorite foods and drinks. For this family, music used to be the gift; now the guitar is silent forever. Marigolds, the flower of the dead, are everywhere. The main song of the film is "Remember Me," and almost a day later it is still playing in my head. "Coco" will be released on Nov. 22. Look for my review then and find out about why the music died.

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I mention "Coco" here because I kept hearing the song "Remember Me" as I walked through the mausoleum. I imagined the dead lying in their caskets chatting to each other from their slotted places of rest and calling out greetings to me. I smiled and said hello (in my head) and prayed for them. (I always wonder who will rise first in a mausoleum on the last day; I intend to be cremated so all they have to do is add water. I'm afraid of heights.)

As the designated mourner for those few quiet minutes, I couldn't stop thinking of the story of "Coco" and memories of loved ones who have gone before us, often leaving us lonely, but often with other powerful sentiments as well. The last 24 hours has been a perfect synchronization of faith, life and cinema.

After the Mass, I drove to the burial sight about a half a mile away as the crow flies, just behind the statue of Jesus the Good Shepherd on a hill looking to the southwest; it was a clear day and I could see far, even the Pacific Ocean. I could smell the sea, too. As I walked across the holy ground, I read many of the grave markers that are flush with the grass — no headstones are allowed in Holy Cross except for family groups kept in their own section. It's a very tidy, well-run place. Flowers may be placed after 3 p.m. on Thursdays and are collected and binned the next Thursday in case you were wondering.

I listened as I walked; the voices were quieter now. Maybe it's more peaceful outside than stacked high in the humid mausoleum. So many people of differing nationalities! Names reflecting Spanish, Korean, Chinese, Irish, German, Vietnamese, Italian, heritage and on and on. While many lived to a good age, a great many died young — that is, younger than I am now. One woman who died at 63 was a "beloved wife, mother and grandmother." What an accomplishment. I hope her family comes to visit her grave on All Souls Day. Flowers soon die, so I hope they will sing to her.



Workers at Holy Cross Cemetery and Mortuary in Culver City, California, prepare the vault to receive the casket for interment. (Sr. Rose Pacatte)

(I reflected that every day is a gift. I turn 66 next month; rock star Tom Petty just died at 66. My mother was 66 when she died. I once told God I'd be happy with 78 years, but when I reached 60 I renegotiated to 86, the age my grandmother was when she died. I like it here.)

After the prayers of committal, I waited with the family and friends for the grounds men to come and lower the casket, now covered with the roses we placed on it. I am usually not the designated mourner, so I didn't realize that those buried in the ground at Holy Cross get two boxes to preserve their remains: the casket (this one a Cadillac model) carefully rigged and placed inside another one, "a cement vault with a seal." (I called up just now and asked what it was made of. The representative explained the use these so that the "soil on top will be even and it is then easy to cut the grass after to keep the landscape looking nice for everyone.")

I watched as our friend's casket was lowered into the vault and the vault into the large hole in the ground. Close family was invited to come forward and toss dirt on top of it. I said my goodbyes as everyone was chatting now about where they were going for the reception. (A room had been set aside at the mortuary, but the family decided on a restaurant in Hollywood.) I deferred and slowly walked back across the holy ground under the very warm noon day sun, praying for the souls of the people who might have no one now to remember them, to pray for them and ease their spiritual passage.

November is the month we traditionally pray for those who have died and gone before us. Yet it is on this October day that I was the designated mourner for our community, and for a little while, for our friend's beloved family and friends. Parishes have grief and funeral ministries, and I have met designated mourners before, so that someone is always in the congregation at the Mass and burial. I remember once meeting a retired man who told me he checks with the parish every day for funerals and attends every one, to make sure no one is left alone to grieve or to be buried.

The Bible tells us "It is therefore a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins" (2 Maccabees 12:46). "To bury the dead" is a corporal work of mercy; "to comfort the sorrowful" and "to pray for the living and the

dead" are spiritual works of mercy, found in the books of Maccabees and Tobit. It is also a wholesome thought to remember that we shall all die someday; of this we can be sure. I hope that on that day I will have a designated mourner or two to sit with my remains and pray to ease my spiritual passage to eternity.

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