Opinion
Spirituality



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I was in the digestive complaint aisle at my local grocery store when a lyric on the music loop caught my attention: "I'm your Venus, I'm your fire, at your desire."

It's a lyric I remember from high school, and from the looks of the customers around me, I was not the only one brought back to prom night in the spring of 1970. But I was the only one who started laughing out loud.

"I'm your Venus? I'm your fire?" Fire, maybe, if we're talking heartburn. Which Greek goddess claims Depends? I'm guessing none of them.

"At your desire?" Maybe back in produce. Who knows what's going on with the bananas? But in this aisle? Nope.

I wonder who chooses the music-to-shop-by. In the grocery store and drugstore, the rock of my youth pours forth. We're still "California Dreamin' " and we're still wondering (or wonderin') "Who'll Stop the Rain," and, from time to time, we still "Twist and Shout," though it takes rest, heat and anti-inflammatories to recover. The hits, as they say, just keep on comin'.

The hits, and the lies. Especially these lies: We're forever young, the world forever new and spread out before us, all yet to be explored. Someone has concluded that humming along to high school memories makes us eager to spend money. I don't doubt the tally of all the purchases made to Three Dog Night. It just makes me weary, and grateful, every year, when November rolls around on the church calendar.

Go to Mass in November and hear the truth: We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, all the saints and all the souls, all the beloved dead, whose number we will soon join. No one in the assembly is counted a teenager except the actual teens in our midst. And even they are reminded, as the psalmist sings, to count their days aright, that they may gain wisdom of heart.

While advertising promises endless youth and endless sex — even, if one ad is to be believed, in a pair of bathtubs, outdoors, on top of a hill, weather, plumbing connections and lower back atherosclerosis be damned! — the church tells the truth. There are not endless days to say, "I love you" or "I'm sorry" or "How can I help?" or "Will you help me?" or "I'm ready to listen." There are not endless days to do the work, to shoulder the burden, to reach out a hand, to answer the call, to tell the

truth, to hear the truth. We can only learn to count our days aright, if we know our days on Earth are counted, with a beginning and an end.

We remember the dead and we pray for them. We remember the saints and we ask them to pray for us. I am praying for Fr. Ken Keller, a longtime parish priest in the Texas Panhandle and once our parish priest. At his funeral earlier this year, a brother priest spoke of Ken's understanding that he had been ordained a priest for the world, with every street his parish. He spoke of his ministry in the parish and school, to those sleeping under bridges and those wandering alone. He spoke of Ken's ministry to men dying of AIDS when so many faced the wasting away of these bodies with a wasting away of their own hearts. I pray for Ken, and I ask him to pray for me.

I pray for Joni Johnson, a woman who dressed like Divine in the old John Waters movies, all paisley caftans, teased hair, lacquered nails and blue eye shadow. Joni — married at 14 to her beloved 15-year-old Dudley, a woman who began her life sharecropping and ended it in the little house on the wrong side of the tracks that she and Dudley had worked hard to buy — is the only person I have ever known who took Jesus at his word when he told the disciples to "give to everyone who asks of you."

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I remember when her next-door neighbor came and asked for money to feed his family. The baby was sick, he told her, and they had spent all they had on medicine. Joni, who never had extra, but who always had enough, told him the truth, "Honey, I don't have any money." She could have stopped there, but she said, "Come on in. You can have half of all my food." And she divided it up: the contents of the refrigerator, the freezer, the pantry. I pray for Joni, and I ask her to pray for me.

I remember them all, the family of my birth and the family of my marriage — my brother, our parents, our grandparents, our aunts and uncles, our niece, our nephew and our cousins — those who loved me so well and those who loved me the best that they could. I pray for them. I pray in thanksgiving, for I am old enough now to know how what a miracle it is to be "loved so well." And I am old enough now to know how costly, how hard it is to "love the best they can."

I remember them and I ask them to remember me, also just loving the best I can. That's an admission I never planned to make, back when "California Dreamin' " was, like me, newly released and climbing the charts. But that was a long time ago, in another time and another place. Here and now, in November, I kneel and pray, "Teach me to count my days aright, and show me, O Lord, your mercy."

[Melissa Musick Nussbaum's latest book, with co-author Anna Keating, is *The Catholic Catalogue: A Field Guide to the Daily Acts That Make Up a Catholic Life*.]

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