News



Nancy Stewart pictured in May 2020 at age 107: "I feel so happy and so refreshed, sitting happily in my own armchair in my own kitchen looking at Mass." (Provided photo)

by Sahm Venter

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Every morning after her prayers, and the first of many mugs of Barry's Irish tea, Nancy Stewart decides where to go to Mass.

When the time comes, the 107-year-old and her granddaughter, Louise Coghlan, 37, joke about preparing sandwiches for the journey, and check that they have money to fill their little red car with fuel. In reality they don't leave the kitchen in Clonard, County Meath; Mass comes to them from the screen of a laptop computer set on a pink floral tray table.

At the beginning of January, the pair, who have been in lockdown together since mid-March 2020, embarked on a "Virtual Mass Tour" of all 32 counties of Ireland. So far, they have crossed off 27 from the list. They had initially planned an Advent tour but put it on hold when Stewart fell ill with a chest infection.

"Granny loves to pray," Coghlan says of Stewart, who holds the honor of likely being the oldest woman in Ireland still living at home. "We listen to Radio Maria on the TV for a while, then we make tea and decide where we are going to Mass." The location chosen, Coghlan does a quick Google search for online Mass in that county.

Coghlan began staying overnight after her grandmother broke her hip in December 2018 and moved in with her when the first of Ireland's lockdowns against the COVID-19 pandemic were imposed. Since then, the country of nearly 5 million people has gone from one of the lowest per capita infection rate in the European Union to the highest in the world.

Thrilled that she can go to Mass without having to leave the comfort of the house she has called home for 84 years, Stewart settled into her black armchair, overlooked by a framed blessing from Pope Francis for her 100th birthday.

Nancy Stewart,107, participates in a Mass virtually every day from her home in Clonard, Cour

Nancy Stewart,107, participates in a Mass virtually every day from her home in Clonard, County Meath, Ireland. (Provided photo)

To Stewart's left is a mounted front-page article from the Meath Chronicle with the headline, "Look up and smile, even if you have your mask on," from a letter the two of them wrote and published to mark Stewart's last birthday, and to give hope to

others during the pandemic.

Her hands wrapped in the rosary beads she carries day and night, her fingers protrude from pastel-colored striped fingerless gloves, knitted for her by an admirer. From behind spectacles, her blue eyes focus on the screen as it flickers to life. Red headphones, or sometimes a pair of AirPods, boost the sound. "Good morning, Father," she says and responds all the way through Mass.

An early victim of the economic downturn, Coghlan lost her job teaching older folk to use their smart phones. Ironically, sheltering with her star student has let her use these skills to help lift her grandmother's spirits.

Before the pandemic Stewart's home resembled a train station. "You wouldn't get a seat. She was so busy with people who wanted to spend time in her company," says Coughlan. Then came COVID-19, and her visitor list shrank to just two of her 17 grandchildren and her daughter, Olive.

Stewart has only left Ireland once in her life, to attend her son's wedding in England, and has hardly travelled within the Emerald Isle.

Never a driver, she relied on family members to take her to Mass and now attends at least two a day, courtesy of Coghlan's cellphone data. "It has cost me a bit, but you know what, it's worth it because she loves it," says Coghlan.

Louise Coghlan, left, poses with her grandmother, Nancy Stewart, inside St. Finian's Church ir

Louise Coghlan, left, poses with her grandmother, Nancy Stewart, inside St. Finian's Church in Clonard, Ireland. (Provided photo)

From the time she turned 100, Stewart has made the occasional appearance on some of Coghlan's Facebook Live events, including one in which she remonstrated with people about panic buying ahead of the lockdown. It was only natural to look to technology for activities to keep themselves occupied.

"North, south, east and west, we've been to Mass and I enjoyed every bit of it," said Stewart in one of Coughlan's events. "I feel so happy and so refreshed, sitting happily in my own armchair in my own kitchen looking at Mass."

Born in Castelrickard, County Meath, on Oct. 16, 1913, the youngest, and now the only survivor, of six siblings, Stewart has lived through the 1918 influenza pandemic, two world wars and the partition of six of the Irish counties to create Northern Ireland. What she remembers most is the rationing of tea in wartime and what a "precious" commodity it was then.

She married Bob Stewart in 1937, and they were blessed with six children. Tragically, in February 1989, while they were turning into St. Finian's Church in Clonard for Mass, another car slammed into theirs, the driver apparently momentarily blinded by the sun.

When Stewart regained consciousness some six days later, she had to be told that her husband had died and that he had already been buried. "Imagine going to Mass and losing your husband and then being so true to your faith? That's the inspiring part of her," says Coghlan.

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Less than 20 years later, Stewart lost her daughter, Margaret, to motor neuron disease, and two years after that, Margaret's twin, Ann, died.

Still, another technological bonus of lockdown is that Stewart can attend online funerals. "I recently watched her watching the funeral of a friend's husband," said Coghlan. "Granny couldn't have prayed any harder, but it gave her great relief."

Her Facebook page, Living and Laughing with Lou, is drawing a growing band of Irish and international supporters for updates about their "Virtual Mass Tour." Every day, mail arrives from different parts of the world: rosary beads, framed photographs, letters and cards, requests for Stewart to pray for people. A Sri Lankan woman living in London sent teabags.

They also receive regular invitations to attend Mass around the world.

Slipping back into their travel fantasy, Coghlan promises: "We'll head to Dublin Airport in February. We have invites that we need to take up straight away."

Among the inviters: the Pontifical Irish College in Rome, St. Anthony's in London, St. Barnabas in New York City and Old St. Pat's in Chicago. And the list grows longer

daily.

[Sahm Venter is a freelance journalist and the editor of several books, including *The Prison Letters of Nelson Mandela*.]