News



Nancy Stewart seen with her rosary beads inside her house in Clonard, County Meath, Ireland (Courtesy of Louise Coghlan)

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CLONARD, IRELAND — Nancy Stewart, an Irish great-great-grandmother whose online Mass tour during the strict lockdowns early in the coronavirus pandemic won her a social media following, has died just weeks before her 108th birthday.

Popularly known as "Granny Nancy," Stewart became noted for her dedication to prayer, her fun attitude and her positive outlook through the bleakest days of the pandemic.

She passed away Sept. 10 at her home of 84 years in the County Meath village of Clonard where she had cocooned with her granddaughter, Louise Coghlan, for the last 18 months.

When the pandemic drove them into a bubble, the pair sat looking at each other to the sound of "a very loud ticking clock," Coghlan said at Stewart's Sept. 12 funeral. "I didn't know how we were going to do it."

Like other countries in Europe, the early lockdown in Ireland in spring 2020 was quite strict, with people nationwide unable to leave their homes except to shop for food or for brief periods of exercise.



Louise Coghlan at Nancy Stewart's house (Courtesy of Claude Colart)

For Stewart and Coghlan, the internet came to the rescue, offering Mass on Zoom. By February this year they reached their goal of attending Mass at least once in each of Ireland's 32 counties and began fulfilling international invitations.

Preparing for Mass at the Irish Pontifical College in Rome, Stewart once quipped: "I'd better get dressed up for this one."

When inquiries came for Zoom interviews about their quest to attend all the Masses, Stewart figured out a routine and instructed Coghlan: "Tap me on the leg when we're ready to go." And then, "Tap again when it's near over."

Coghlan's Facebook page became a central hub, bursting with snippets of her life with Stewart, including answering prayer requests, apple pie baking and dressing up for St. Patrick's Day.

"That wasn't Granny's actor's mask, that's what she was like in real life," Fr. Gerard Breen, who also spoke at Stewart's funeral Mass, told NCR. He praised Coghlan's "stroke of genius of noticing how very special Gran's faith was and Gran as a human being was."

Giving his funeral homily at St. Finian's Church in Clonard, Breen recognized Stewart's "Facebook family" alongside her own.



Nancy Stewart and Fr. Gerard Breen (Photo courtesy of Louise Coghlan)

In a phone conversation from County Laois, where he is the parish priest at Sacred Heart Church, Stradbally, Breen said: "Louise was instrumental in making Gran a Catholic influencer to millions worldwide."

Breen and Stewart first met in 2014 at the funeral wake of Stewart's son-in-law, Joe Coghlan, who died at age 64. Breen sat with the then 101-year-old, who had already lost two daughters and her husband, and spoke of suffering and premature death.

"I was kind of leaving it as an open question, like a mystery, that nobody really has figured out," said Breen. "Lo and behold, within a millisecond, she came back with a very good answer — total trust in God is the key."

"Here's Nancy Stewart, echoing the words of the Lord, giving me, the priest, the perfect answer," said Breen.

"She had an uncomplicated faith," he said. "She just went straight to the top as it were — bypassed all the kind of things people get into knots about."

When his mother, Rita, died in February, Breen gave Stewart his mother's rosary beads, which had been blessed by Pope Francis.

"I don't want to get kind of holy, holy, holy. My mom had a great sense of humor and so did Gran," he said. "I don't want to steal their humanity from them by talking too much in religious terms."

But he called Stewart a "Catholic influencer" because her witness on social media likely brought back to the church those unsure of "where they stand in terms of faith."

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Seated in Stewart's armchair at the home they shared during the pandemic, Coghlan told NCR her grandmother effectively converted her back to Catholicism. The granddaughter said that when she moved in full time in March 2020, "I would have hardly said a prayer."

Coghlan said seeing faith in practice through "someone humble and unassuming, who isn't pushing it" not only helped the Facebook page grow, it led Coghlan back to the faith.

"Granny just turned to prayer every single time there was a quiet minute," said Coghlan. "If I said I was going out to make tea, by the time I'd have the kettle boiled and turned round and come back she'd be in the middle of prayers."

Mail still comes to the 200-year-old house from places like Hawaii, Canada and the United States, and Coghlan has met people from around Ireland praying at her grandmother's grave.

"If anyone has relit the Catholic faith, it's Granny, and she lit it by accident," said Coghlan. "I am so proud of her and I'm so proud we did it together."

Coghlan's mother, Olive, also came for a visit at the house. The two recalled Stewart's last night, when she ate a supper of fish fingers and fried bread — followed by custard.

"She even joined in the prayers and had a bit of a giggle when I didn't know the 'Hail Holy Queen,' " said Olive.

Then, in the early hours of the morning, "she sneaked off on us."

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