Opinion
Guest Voices
Appreciation



by Kathy Coffey

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

January 10, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Editor's note: *A version of this appreciation previously appeared in a blog post by the author.*

With a peal of laughter, the dynamic, groundbreaking Dolores Curran arrived in heaven on Dec. 4.

At a time when the U.S. Catholic Church was dominated by priests and religious, she introduced the then-shocking notion that the laity might also play a part. In her groundbreaking 1985 book *Who, Me Teach My Child Religion?*, she suggested the home was an arena for spirituality and that parents just might find God there. She taught that the sacred work of relationships doesn't happen only at church or on retreat, but in kitchens, garages and bedrooms.

In the family were "hearts of flesh" sometimes sadly missing from the sterile, institutional "hearts of stone" that still can't embrace the gay or lesbian kids. Now her ideas seem mild; then they were wildly coloring-outside-the-lines.

She recalled with disappointment the origins of Call to Action in the 1970s. The bishops had asked laypeople like herself for consultation, then after long, grueling meetings when many left young families, the hierarchy totally disavowed their recommendations. (Apparently the same suggestions, like allowing married men and women to become priests still surface in the current synodal discussions.)

A model of graceful dealing with discouragement, she turned with joy to her newborn twin granddaughters after her husband Jim's death. Her dear friend and best-selling author Servite Sr. Joyce Rupp told me, "Dolores simply named things as she saw them, stood by what she spoke and wrote, and made no apologies for it. When Dolores and I conversed from time to time about the nasty messages she received from readers and those who attended her talks, she never responded with similar antipathy."

Although writing 12 books, a column ("Talks with Parents" for 30 years) and numerous articles might seem arduous in the clerical climate, Dolores did it all with spunk and humor. In one article she described driving through Nebraska during the time when Lincoln Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz excommunicated members of Call to Action. From the back seat came "Hoorays!" Her kiddos overheard the hint they might not have to go to Mass and were *thrilled* — perhaps not what the bishop intended? She wrote one for America magazine when the only names on their masthead had "S.J." after them, about women in the church being like the builders of Irish famine roads that went nowhere. …

Her book that bridged from the Catholic world into the mainstream was 1984's Christopher Award-winning *Traits of a Healthy Family*. Typical of Dolores, she focused not on pathology, but on characteristics parents might recognize and say, "Hey! We're not doing so badly!" That work led to even more lectures nationally and internationally, and service with the White House Conference on Family in the 1980s.

Advertisement

Her sense of humor carried into a project in Denver, her home, when some of us started an alternative to the diocesan newspaper. The diocesan publication featured 15 pictures of the archbishop in almost every issue. We began Leaven for the "thinking Catholic," and included book and film reviews, thoughtful questioning of some egregious diocesan and Vatican policies, and when we were lucky, a hilarious contribution from Dolores.

When the bishops fretted that married couples were getting too much joy from sex, Dolores proposed a "Pleasure-o-Meter" to record dangerous ecstasy levels. A former priest who had a doctorate in liturgy wrote "Egeria's Travels" reviews of local liturgies. We chortled at his self-description: "*reduced* to the lay state, like a fine sauce." Dolores and Loretto Sr. Mary Luke Tobin served for many years on our board, always generous with their support.

Subtly, she shifted the way I thought about myself. We'd always been taught that the religious life was the "higher way," and the laity were second-class citizens. So when I asked, "What could a mom with four young kids, who's scrambling to teach five college classes, possibly have to say about spirituality?" Dolores answered, "Plenty." After my 16 books, countless articles, talks and retreats, maybe she was right.

Personally, I'll always be grateful for the vital encouragement Dolores and Joyce Rupp gave when I transitioned from college teaching to writing and speaking in the spirituality arena. If it hadn't been for them, I probably would have floundered and quit within two weeks. Now, I continue to cherish her bold acuity, breath of fresh air and model I've tried to follow.

In his 2017 book, *Eight Whopping Lies and Other Stories of Bruised Grace*, Brian Doyle eloquently describes who Dolores was: "If we cannot see God in the vessels into which the electricity of astonishing life is poured by a profligate creation … then we are very bad at the religion we claim to practice, which says forthrightly that God is everywhere available."

With grief for the loss and gratitude for the gift, I remember St. Thomas More's line about "meeting merrily in heaven." Surely Dolores chortles uproariously now with

Jim, their daughter Theresa, and her many siblings. In fact, Dolores and God are probably cracking zany jokes together.