

Ashes to ashes

Joe Ferullo | Feb. 19, 2010 NCR Today

No one had seen Robina Dumas at church, but everyone knew why. She had fallen ill, and things did not look good. Craig, her husband of more than 60 years, still came every Sunday, sitting by himself at the edge of a pew. We'd always said hello to him and his wife on Sundays, but really got to know them when their daughter Kathy started teaching our kids piano.

We'd always ask Craig about Robina, and he'd smile some and say she seemed better or stronger or livelier. Until he would just smile and shrug slightly. We'd learned from others how much she had done for parish in decades pass, as she was raising her children and even long after they had grown. She was a fixture, people said, in 1950s, 1960s and on.

We got the call from Kathy one night not long ago -- her mother had passed. The funeral was set for that Saturday.

My wife and I wondered how Craig was taking it -- and how the parish would respond. Robina had been a key figure there years ago, but would anyone remember now? Life, especially in places like Los Angeles, is always in motion -- people move out and move on, taking their memories with them.

When we entered the church, we got our answer: it was packed with family, of course, but also with friends, new and old. People from the neighborhood, and people who had left but had not forgotten. My wife spotted Craig in the first pew: at nearly ninety, he was still ramrod straight, a tall man who stood above the rest in many ways. He seemed all right. Kathy told us that parishioners had come by the house in a steady stream, and had made plans to continue for as long as Craig needed.

Last Sunday, we sat behind him and chatted before Mass began; he told us about all the people who called and kept in contact every day. At the kiss of peace, he took my hand firmly and said: "You don't know how the people here have helped me. You don't know until you go through something like this what a parish means."

After Mass, we walked out together and talked some more. We met some other friends of ours in the vestibule, and Craig waved goodbye. He went out the front doors, stood briefly by the statue of St. Francis de Sales. I watched as he turned and looked back at the church with a sigh. He was about to step away alone when two couples came over, old friends, and sat down with him in the sun.

A broad grin found his face; his eyes lit up; life kicked up a notch or two inside.

And that, I thought, is what a parish means.