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Communion denied, grieving deprived for woman spurned at funeral Mass

by Kate Childs Graham

COLUMN

"I'm her partner."

Those are the only words Fr. Marcel Guarnizo of St. John Neumann Catholic Church in Gaithersburg, Md., needed to hear. Those are the only words he used to inform his conscience, to base his decision to deny Communion to a grieving woman at her mother's funeral.

By now, the story has been widely reported. Barbara Johnson, a Washington, D.C.-area Catholic, had come to St. John Neumann's on Saturday for the funeral Mass. After learning that morning that Johnson lived with her female partner of 20 years, Guarnizo put his hands over the communion platter and did not let Johnson partake.

But, in a compelling phone interview Wednesday, Johnson said the denial was just the climax of a series of unfortunate and uncompassionate events surrounding her mother's funeral.

In the weeks and months leading up to her mother's death, Johnson, who was raised Catholic and has attended and taught at Catholic schools, said she was virtually unaware of the fight for same-sex marriage in her home state of Maryland, which is set to legalize the practice this week following the state senate's Feb. 23 approval.

Instead, Johnson said she spent every one of her waking hours in the past weeks making sure her mother had the care she needed after a severe heart attack that led her to the ICU.

"We worked hard to take care of her," Johnson said.

When her mother died last week, Johnson said she worked hard to honor her death the same way she did her life. "It was my mother's funeral, not my funeral. We did the exact funeral that my mother wished, at the exact place," she said.

Johnson said she and her family met with St. John Neumann's music director, who assured them they would be able to deliver two eulogies. However, in a brief meeting with Guarnizo before the Mass, Johnson said the priest said there could only be one eulogy -- that "this is how it is done all the time."

Johnson said her brother responded: "Well, we don't bury our mother all the time."

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In that meeting, Johnson said Guarnizo never offered his condolences for her mother's passing. And when he asked Johnson's partner who she was, she replied, "I'm her partner."

Johnson said during the Mass, Guarnizo -- without having spoken again to her in private -- denied her Communion, saying, "I can't give you Communion because you live with a woman, and in the eyes of the church, that is a sin."

In shock and dismay, Johnson's friends and family did not take Communion.

"My whole family wished to take Communion not only to be in communion with Jesus Christ, but to be in communion with my mother, with each other as we grieved," she said.

Guarnizo said he was ill and left during the eulogy, Johnson said. He did not accompany the family to the burial site. According to Johnson, he made no effort to find a replacement, so the responsibility fell to the funeral home director, who called on Fr. Peter Sweeney of Silver Spring, Md., to join the family at the cemetery.

Sweeney's demeanor was a stark contrast to that of Guarnizo, Johnson said.

"He was an angel, a balm on our hearts," she said. "He was everything I knew the Catholic church to be."

For Johnson, perhaps the biggest tragedy is those Catholics who are leaving the church after witnessing or hearing her story.

"So many people have said to me that now they'll never go back," she said. "That would break my mother's heart.

"[My family's] mission is not to divide the church," she added. "Our mission is to receive an apology from Fr. Marcel."

Messages left for Guarnizo for comment on the incident were not immediately returned. While Johnson said she has not heard from the priest, she said she has found some solace from the response of other church leaders.

Johnson said Fr. Thomas LaHood, St. John Neumann's pastor, who had come to the funeral home to

provide pastoral support to the family the evening before the Mass, has been "wonderful and apologetic and graceful and Christ-like."

Johnson said LaHood told her, "I wish I could take it all back."

In the interview with *NCR*, Johnson also referenced a talk she had with Msgr. Michael Fisher, the Washington archdiocese's secretary for ministerial leadership, who told her a funeral has two main aspects: to celebrate the life of the deceased and to create an opportunity to reflect on their faith.

"Fr. Guarnizo in no way celebrated the life of my mother ... and his actions have turned away people from the church," she said.

Auxiliary Bishop Barry Knestout, the vicar general of the archdiocese, also wrote a letter to Johnson in which he said, "I am sorry that what should have been a celebration of your mother's life, in light of her faith in Jesus Christ, was overshadowed by a lack of pastoral sensitivity."

The letter did not mention what, if any, action would be taken against Guarnizo.

Johnson's grief over the incident was evident. "I'm grieving for my mother as best I can in this time of distraction," she said.

However, she also said her resolve remains strong.

"The fact that this has resonated shows that the church is in need of healing," she said. "My family will continue to urge for more awareness until this man is removed from parish life and has apologized to my family. Our mission is to make sure no other family will experience this kind of tragedy."

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