Columns
Spirituality



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by Joan Sauro

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August 22, 2023

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Here is the church — a small bedroom.

Here is the altar — a bed with five pillows propped.

Here is the offering — my brother Joseph sunk in the pillows. He is reduced to skin and bones. His brown eyes are alert.

Here is the celebrant, a kind priest friend. He and a church full of priests have just concelebrated Mass for a revered monsignor in august surroundings, after which the priest raced to be with us in an ordinary bedroom.

Here is the congregation — my brother's wife, his two sisters and a dear friend. Four women at a tomb, so it seems.

The celebrant stands in a bedroom and prays reverently. Nonstop. Without book or notes, he prays over my wide-eyed brother. Now and then comes "Amen" from the four women.

The priest takes a single Communion host out of a pyx, breaks the host in half, and offers it to my brother. Sunk in his pillows, he nods yes. And so my brother receives viaticum, holy Communion for the sick.

There remains a half host for four women. When the priest offers the sacrament to my sister-in-law, she whispers, "I'm not Catholic."

The priest answers, "Doesn't matter," and she makes her first Communion with her dying husband in their bedroom.

After the sacrament, my brother revives. For two weeks, he wheels himself out to the living room while birds in a nest sing outside.

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While the birds sing, I hunt through Gospel pages to find samples of miraculous cures. In one, Christ enters another bedroom and announces that the 12-year-old child lying there is not dead, only sleeping. Amid the scorn and mocking laughs, he takes the child by the hand and says, "Stand up." And she does, giving the scoffers something better to laugh about. He tells them, "Give her something to eat," as if traveling through the valley of death had made her hungry.

Here I plead with Christ. "Once you raised a little girl from the dead. Now I beg you to raise my brother Joseph from near death. After all, he bears your father's name."

Here I keep begging, birds keep singing, my brother keeps sinking. Back to his bed with the five pillows. *Keep, keep* my brother alive, I pray.

Here is June 22, the longest day of the year. Friend Janet and I visit Joe midmorning. This day we have brought family pictures, and show them slowly. He recognizes only one and says, clearly, "Ma."

We each kiss Joe fondly and tell him we love him.

Four hours later, my youngest brother calls to say our oldest brother has died.

We are stunned. Dumb. Inert. For two weeks, very little happens. The undertaker comes. My brother's body leaves. Outside the window, the birds sing. But nobody listens.

Back home, I look at $200 I will never spend. My brother's last birthday gift. Janet looks at a photo of the two of them with a cigar hanging out of their mouths. We laugh and cry.

My brother was a gambling man all his life. Atlantic City, Vegas, life. As we all know, in the end, the house always wins. And this is true. In more ways than one.

Just before Christ died, he said, "I go to my Father's house to prepare a room for you."

And that is where Joseph Anthony Sauro lives now. He is eternally home. As is every single person in *your* life who has left.

And we miss them, more than words can say, here on earth.