

Sheila Fitzpatrick RIP
Funeral Mass
Rathdowney Church
Friday 26th February 2021

Sheila Fitzpatrick (née Ryan), Newtownperry, Rathdowney, Co. Laois. February 24th 2021. Peacefully in the wonderful care of the doctors, nurses and staff of Portlaoise Regional hospital. Predeceased by her husband Christy and her brother Thomas. Deeply regretted by her loving family, Brian, Sharon and Linda, daughter-in-law Catherine, sons-in-law Ronnie and Kieran, grandchildren Grace, Ethan, Ella, Lauren, Christine, Rosie, Siúbhan, Caoilfhionn, Lúca and Cuan, her sisters Maureen O' Connor, Barbara Fitzpatrick, Eileen O' Connor, brother Joe Ryan, brothers-in-law, sister-in-law, nieces, nephews, relatives and a wide circle of friends. _

In the last seven weeks this church here in Rathdowney has hosted the funerals of eight mothers, all of them in the words of today's first reading, valiant women. I met someone yesterday morning who said to me; 'When the curtain of this pandemic is lifted we will be desperately sad to see all the people we have lost and have not been able to mourn properly'

I have to admit I feel desperately sad today to be celebrating this funeral Mass for Shelia Fitzpatrick. I loved my interactions with Shelia, her sense of humour, her directness, the affirming word that always gave me a lift. I can recall one day after a funeral here Shelia sought me out to comment on what I had said about the deceased. As she was walking away she said; 'If you are still here when I die I wonder what you will say about me' I shouted after her that I already had opened the file and was regularly updating it. She shook her hand at me.

Well Shelia, today is the day that file is finally opened and with the help of your family it has been updated one last time.

Shelia Ryan was born on Friday the 24th of September 1943 in Brooklyn, New York during the Second World War. Shelia was the second of what

would become a family of six children, four of them born in America. Shelia's parents, Joe Ryan from Rathdowney and Elizabeth or Lilian Murphy from Clare, had met and married in New York. They had a comfortable life there and the intention was to stay. A request from home that Joe would come back to run the family Bakery and grocery business on the square in Rathdowney must have been a huge upheaval for that young family. Sheila was five and had already started school. Leaving all that behind and face into the unknown on the other side of the Atlantic must have been the first major experience of loss in Shelia's life. The Ryan family sailed home to Ireland on the 20th of November 1948. It was a rough winter crossing on the ship the M.V. Britannic and everybody got sick.

While Rathdowney was a thriving Market town in the late forties and early fifties it was not New York and the transition for the young Ryan family cannot have been easy. From an early age Shelia developed an interest in figures and a head for business and would probably have very much liked to continue her formal education. But responsibility to the family business was again to intervene in Sheila's life and she had to leave school after 6th class and work full time in the bakery. Having to leave school at that early age might well have appealed to some but I suspect for Sheila it represented the second big loss in her life. But an even bigger loss was to follow very soon after when her beloved older brother Thomas or Butchy was to get ill and die in November 1957 aged just 15 years old. The last mass that Sheila participated in here through the webcam on the 18th of February was celebrated for her parents Joe and Lilian and her brother Thomas.

In a real sense Shelia had to grow up quickly in her teenage years and shoulder responsibilities few of her age were expected to do. She was now the big sister to her four younger siblings and as Eileen recalled, Sheila was to one to read you bedtime stories after she had helped you with your homework particularly the maths. She also would become your haven in troubled times. In the early 1960's when her dad got ill Sheila stepped up to the plate and started driving the big bread van to

deliver the bread and groceries to all the local shops and homes in the area. But those early 1960's were not all about work and responsibility. There was also time for some fun and somewhere along the way she met and fell in love with Christy Fitzpatrick from Grangemore, Borris In Ossory. Sheila and Christy were married here in this church on the 7th of July 1965. They bought their first and only home in Newtownperry.

As I listened to Brian and Sharon and Linda speak about their mother and their experience of home, your first abiding memory was of how open and welcoming that home in Newtownperry was. It was open to neighbours and friends including all of your friends. It was a place people gravitated to. Joe, you also spoke of how Newtownperry became the focal point for you and your siblings when your parents passed away. The gatherings around the kitchen table where food was sometimes miraculously produced often at very short notice. Bread was broken and shared, stories were told, memories forever created. Not that dissimilar from what happened in that gospel scene I read a few minutes ago when three friends gathered to share stories and break bread together. Linda is going to read a very beautiful reflection after Communion today called 'A Mother's Journey' There is one line in there which struck a chord with me. It reads; *"This day is the best day of all the other days, for today I have shown my children the face of God"* I would suggest that all those days when your mam opened her door, opened her table were days she showed you the face of God. What happened at the table in Emmaus we call Eucharist, What happened around that kitchen table in Newtownperry was also Eucharist.

Shelia's natural ability with figures and mathematics and her experience in the Bakery business in a way led her quite naturally to the next phase of her working career. She was employed by the IFAC irish farm accounts company for many years as 'a recorder'. This basically involved her visiting at least eighty farmers throughout these local communities and getting from them accurate information about their income and tax liabilities. While some of the farmers, who didn't easily part with such details may not always have been thrilled to see Sheila turn up in the

yard, their children were always happy when she came because she brought some goodies like biscuits and sweets. I suspect there could have been some psychology at work here. Happy children may have encouraged their fathers to cooperate with the Lady with the Ledger.

Who shall find a valiant woman, Who shall find a woman of strength? She is worth far more than jewels. He associates all have confidence in her and benefit from her expertise.

If I'd had a chance to have answered Sheila's question to me about what I would say about her at her funeral, we might have referred to those lines from the First Reading today. I'd like to have said to her that I knew she had the respect and confidence of many people over the years. The discrete and trustworthy shoulder she had provided for many to lean and cry on. Neither was I surprised to see in the messages on the condolence page of RIP.ie where there were many references to Sheila's sense of humour, her smile and her laughter. She was just a great character in this community and we will miss her.

But whatever sense of loss we as a community feel it pales in comparison to the loss being felt by the people gathered here in the church today. Maureen, Barbara, Eileen and Joe. You are the family Sheila was born into and you also represent here today the extended Ryan families. I know from my conversations with her that Shelia was very proud to be a Ryan and she relished Ryan family get-togethers. And to the family that Shelia and Christy created together, Brian, Sharon and Linda and to your children, Shelia's ten grandchildren, gathered somewhere in the environs of this church today. Whenever I asked her how she was, the answer would always somehow include a reference to how good her family were to her and how lucky she was to have ye. I know the three of ye will say that ye were just in some way repaying her for her love and dedication and for creating the opportunities for ye to reach your full potential in life. By your own admission your mother's love was at times of the 'tough love' variety. Your father's most effective form of discipline was to threaten ye with your mother. You learned that if you wanted to do something which might not meet with her approval then it was best to wait until she had lit up the first cigarette of the day.

The witness of your parents love for each other and how that love was shared with you has I'm sure been a huge influence in all of your lives. You witnessed the pain of the greatest loss in your mam's life when your dad died 14 years ago. The one great consolation of today is that they are now reunited together in heaven. As Shelia goes from us today the greatest legacy she leaves is what each of the three of you have become. The last lines of that reflection from after Communion today are, and it is no harm for us to hear them twice. *"I have reached the end of my journey. And now I know the end is better than the beginning, for my children can walk with dignity and pride, with their heads held high, and so can their children after them."*

So Shelia, In answer to your question, I hope you are happy with at least some of things that ended up in the file and that we did some justice to your wonderful life. While we are very sad that you are leaving us and we are even more sad that your life was cut short by this dreadful pandemic which has caused so much pain for so many, despite all that today we want to celebrate your life. Thank you for the happiness you brought into so many in this community and beyond and for the lasting memories you created for so many people. Thank you for the witness of your Faith and your commitment to this parish. Through the intercession of your go-to man of faith, Padre Pio and The Sacred Heart himself we commend you to the merciful love of God.

I would like to finish today with some lines taken from a poem I have had cause to reflect on a lot lately. It is John O' Donohue's beautiful poem; *'On the death of a Beloved'*

Though we cannot see you with outward eyes,
We know our soul's gaze is upon your face,
Smiling back at us from within everything
To which we bring our best refinement.

Let us not look for you only in memory,
Where we would grow lonely without you.
You would want us to find you in presence,
Beside us when beauty brightens,
When kindness glows
And music echoes eternal tones.

When orchids brighten the earth,
Darkest winter has turned to spring;
May this dark grief flower with hope
In every heart that loves you.

So Shelia

May you continue to inspire us:
To enter each day with a generous heart.
To serve the call of courage and love
Until we see your beautiful face again
In that land where there is no more separation,
Where all tears will be wiped from our mind,
And where we will never lose you again.

Shelia. May your gentle soul rest in Peace

John O'Donohue