

**Helen Woods RIP**  
**Funeral Mass**  
**Durrow Church**  
**Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> March 2022**

*Peacefully at her residence. Predeceased by her husband John and sister Peggy. Deeply regretted by her loving children Brian, Anne, Dermot, Tracey and Sean, sisters Kitty and Joan, brother Michael, son in law, daughter in law, sisters in law, brothers in law, grandchildren Sarah, Emma, James, Marie, Conn and Cillian, nieces, nephews, relatives, neighbours and friends.*

It struck me the other day that one of the sad ironies of Helen's 84 years of life is that both the beginning and the end of her life has been marked by news headlines about war in Europe. Thankfully Helen would have had no awareness of what was happening in Ukraine in the last weeks of her life but having been born in England in January 1938 as the dark clouds of war were gathering over Europe that conflict did have a big impact on a young girl's life. With her siblings, Helen was sent for safety to both sets of grandparents in Kerry while their parents remained in England. For the rest of her life even though she would go back to train as a nurse in England and eventually return to live her life in Carlow and Laois, Helen Woods nee O'Sullivan would always consider herself to be a Kerry woman.

In January of 2016 The Irish Times published a collection entitled; The Wit and Wisdom of Kerry- an immodest selection. I am reminded of one of the quotations from that article as we say farewell to Helen today.

The quotation is taken from a speech given by the late John B.Keane to the Kerry Association in Dublin some years ago and he says:

*Being a Kerry person, in my opinion, is the greatest gift that God can bestow on any human being. When you belong to Kerry you know you have a head start on the other fellow. In belonging to Kerry you belong to the elements, to the spheres spinning in the Heavens. You belong to History and Language and*

*Romance and Ancient Song. It is almost unbearable being a Kerry person and it is an awesome responsibility.*

I'm not sure if Helen saw being from Kerry as an awesome responsibility but she certainly loved the Kingdom and went there many many times over the years together with John bringing you their family on camping trips and many other holidays as well.

When things settled down after the war and Helen's father got a job at The Sugar Factory in Carlow the O'Sullivan family were all able to live under the one roof again in No 33 St. Killian's Crescent in Carlow. As I already mentioned as a young woman Helen went back to London to train as a nurse at the Whittington Hospital. In recent years Helen became a great fan of the TV series 'Call The Midwife'. The series chronicles the lives of a number of nurses and doctors working among the people of the East End of London in the 1950's and 60's. That TV series brought back many memories to Helen and her early nursing career. Returning to Ireland Helen worked briefly in Dublin before returning to Carlow and a job at St. Dymphna's hospital. Later she to be one of the first nurses to work with psychiatric patients in their own homes and in the community. Helen loved that work and her gentle nature made her an ideal candidate for such a caring and sensitive role. Going back to that article from the Irish Times about Kerry people there was another beautiful quote from a famous Kerry woman which comes to mind. It was from the great social justice campaigner Sr. Stan and in a piece entitled: "I am of Kerry" Stan says the following:

*"As a young child my father often told me: Tóg go bog é agus bogfaidh sé chugat. (Tog go bug e, agus buggy se cuait) The essence of my father's message was that if we say 'Yes' to life and not resist or fight it, then life will come freely, gently and fully". Sr. Stanislaus Kennedy. As I listened to Anne and Tracey talk about their mother's life and how she lived it I thought of the many ways she too had said Yes to life at its different stages. While she loved her work as a community nurse in Carlow, love and marriage and the strange laws of the land intervened. At a dance in that famous dreamland Ballroom in Athy Helen was to meet John Bowe,*

a Master Bread baker from Durrow. John and Helen married on the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 1966. The law at that time demanded that women had to give up their jobs on getting married. So yes Helen, like Sr. Stan said Yes to a new life, she did not resist or fight it. John and Helen had 56 years of marriage before John passed away just two months ago. John was in hospital over the New Year and he noted in his diary this was the first New Year's Eve in 56 years they had not been together. In the midst of the sadness that you as a family feel in these days as you have had to say farewell to both of your parents in such a short space of time, there is I'm sure more than a little consolation in knowing that this couple who loved you all so much are now together again and the veil of confusion and illness has been lifted forever.

Helen's ability to say *Yes' to life and not resist or fight it, allowing life to come freely, gently and fully*". was also influenced by her strong Christian faith and her trust in her God. Like all cute Kerry people when it came to communicating with her God Helen had a number of go-to people to intercede on her behalf. (Maybe you could call these the spiritual equivalent of the Healey Ray family) Having lived in Carlow Helen was very aware of the Spiritual powerhouse which is The Poor Clare Sisters in Graiguecullen and whenever there was a special intention to be prayed for she headed back to the Poor Clares and asked them to pray. But she also had a few influential people even closer to the man above. I noticed in Helen's coffin a few prayer cards to St. Martha and St. Anthony and St. Jude. Now Jude is the patron of situations when things are really challenging. I'm not sure when Helen might have needed his help but I suppose you can't be the mother of five without calling on him from time to time. Anthony helped her to find not only things that were lost but he was also called upon if she or one of the family might find themselves lost for some appropriate word in an exam or an interview. Martha of course is the patron of all those who provide hospitality and care and a loving home for family, friends and visitors alike. But Martha was also the woman who as we heard in the gospel today professed Jesus to be the Messiah, and The Son of God. That was

the same Faith which Helen professed too As she slipped away peacefully on Friday afternoon she could say with St. Paul in today's reading '*The time of my departure has come, I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race' I have kept the faith.*

Helen, you have and now may your gentle soul rest in peace.