

Johanna Drennan RIP
Died on 15th April 2023 in Naas
Memorial Mass
Durrow Church
Saturday 13th May 2023

The context of our gathering here in Durrow today is directly connected back to the Covid 19 pandemic which officially hit our shores in early March 2020 just over a month before Johanna (Anne) died. Much has been said and written about the impact Covid has had and continues to have on our society. I was particularly struck by the words of one commentator has summed up very well one such impact as he wrote: *"This highly contagious virus has forced us to suppress our nature as social creatures, for fear that we might infect or be infected," and "it has denied us the grace of being present for a loved one's last moments." And as a result, "Age-old customs that lend meaning to existence have been up-ended. . .* (Dan Berry New York Times)

In Ireland we have many of those age-old customs which have served us so well particularly at the time of the death of a loved one. For the most part we took those for granted, being able to sit at a bedside, to hold a hand, to kiss a loved one good bye, to have a wake in the presence and face of the loved one who has died, to embrace or at least shake hands with the bereaved, to turn up in droves at the funeral, to gather afterwards to break bread, to reminisce and share the familiar stories. We have all participated in these rituals perhaps hundreds of times and more significantly, most if not all of us have also been at the receiving end of these same rituals and we know how important and how powerful those simple gestures were in helping us to cope with the loss of our loved ones. But for more than two years those significant gestures of healing have been absent from all of our lives. In large part they were absent for Johanna and her family when she died on the 15th of April 2020. With very tight restrictions and the absolute minimum of ritual Michael, Robert and Paul brought their mum here to Durrow to be buried with their dad Matt. We are here today just over three years later

to give to Johanna and to you her family and friends the send off that she deserved.

As I said at the beginning of Mass, we are here in the first instance to pray for Johanna's soul, to commend her to the love and mercy of God. We are also here to celebrate her life, to give thanks to God for the blessing this valiant woman was to her family and to so many others whose lives she touched. We are here too to sympathize and support you her family particularly, Michael, Robert and Paul.

The boys shared with me the text of a piece which appeared in The Kerry's Eye Newspaper after Johanna died. Paul will read the full text of that piece towards the end of Mass today. It is a fascinating account and insight into the woman we honour today. I was particularly struck by the heading on the piece which reads; *Where some might fall, she stood bright to light the way.*

When I read that heading and then the story of Johanna's quite extraordinary life and having had a chance to listen to Michael, Robert and Paul talk about their mother a number of things kept crossing my mind. First of all the appropriateness of that First reading from the Book of Proverbs for Johanna's mass today: *Who shall find a valiant woman, who shall find a woman of strength....she works diligently, taking pride in her inner resources and strengths....she is strong and respected, and not afraid of the future. She speaks with wisdom and teaches in a kindly way* So much of those words of scripture have found a very strong echo in Johanna Drennan's life.

Johanna was born in South west Kerry and lived the first seventeen years of her life in the Cahersiveen area. Even though she was the spend the next 73 years living outside the kingdom she would always remain a proud 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 some of the quotations from that article as we celebrate Johanna's life today.

The first 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 Johanna ever saw being from Kerry as an awesome responsibility but she certainly loved the Kingdom and went home there many many times over the years together with you, her family.

As beautiful as South West Kerry was and is and as idyllic a life Johanna had as a child and young teenager growing up there, opportunities for creating a better standard of living were somewhat limited in late 1940's Ireland. Johana's older sisters had already gone to work in London and so in 1947 Johanna too set out on the train from Cahersiveen station on the long journey that would shape the rest of her life. She had £10 in her pocket but more importantly she also traveled with a few other things which perhaps were much more valuable. There was that inner resourcefulness strength, determination and resilience but she also brought with her a very strong Catholic Christian faith which would sustain her in good and challenging times in the years that followed.

Johanna began her working career in the prestigious Barker's Department store in Kensington high Street in London. At the same time she took secretarial classes at night because she always believed that the more qualifications and education she had the greater opportunities would be open to her. Just a short few years after arriving in London Johanna met, fell in love and married her first husband, Mike Baker. Sadly, Mike died tragically after only one year of marriage. *Where some might fall, she stood bright to light the way.*

Despite this terrible personal blow, that resilience, determination and faith together with the support of her sisters and friends Johanna moved

on with her life. She was offered a secretarial job with the chief fashion buyer of Great Universal Stores, a chain of fashion retail shops with over 250 shops. She was later to take over her bosses job and became the fashion buyer for this big Jewish Company. No small achievement for a young Catholic lass from South west Kerry.

As well as finding such success in her career Johanna was also blessed to find love again when she met a young Sadlier from Durrow Co Laois, one Matt Drennan. The fruit of their love and marriage was their three sons, Michael, Robert and Paul. Matt and Johanna decided that they would like to raise and educate their young family back home in Ireland. They ultimately decided to settle in Naas Co. Kildare but sadly after a very short few years tragedy was to visit Johanna's door again when Matt died suddenly. Johanna was only forty-six, a widow for the second time and now with three young sons to rear. *Where some might fall, she stood bright to light the way.*

I am reminded of another one of those quotations from The Irish Times about Kerry and it's people. This one comes from a very famous Kerry woman whom I've had the chance to know a little over the years. She is the great social Justice campaigner; Sr. Stanislaus Kennedy better known just as Sr. Stan. 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 you lads talk about your 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 particularly when huge challenges came her way. Johanna dedicated her life to her three sons. She was a passionate believer in the value of education

Recently in another context I came across two quotes from two men who have had a profound effect on their own countries and beyond,

Abraham Lincoln and Nelson Mandela. They were both speaking about education. Lincoln said;

"Upon the subject of education ... I can only say that I view it as the most important subject which we as a people may be engaged in."

A few hundred years later Nelson Mandela commented:

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world"

I don't know if Johanna was aware of either of those quotes, but she absolutely agreed with the truth enshrined in both.

It is in many ways very appropriate that we gather here to celebrate Johanna's life in the month of May. It is the month of Mary. The statue of Mary presented at the beginning of Mass today was symbolic of Johanna's very strong faith and her particular devotion to Mary. For many years she was very active in The Legion of Mary in her parish in Naas. Like Mary, Johanna has known the Joyful, Glorious and sadly also the Sorrowful mysteries of life. At times of confusion and sadness in her life, Mary trusted in her God that his plans would be fulfilled in her life. Johanna also trusted in her God even at those times when her faith and trust were sorely tested.

The final words of The Book of Proverbs today *Charm is superficial and beauty fades. But the woman who honours the Lord is to be praised*

This valiant woman Johanna Drennan honoured and served the Lord all thorough her life and we praise and thank God for her life today.

Johanna, when you left this world so quietly three years ago you could have said with St. Paul *the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.*

Johanna, you have and now may your gentle soul rest in Peace.