

Rita O'Brien RIP
Funeral Mass
Rathdowney Church
Saturday 1st April 2023

Rita O'Brien (nee Byrne), Errill Road, Rathdowney, Co. Laois and formerly Drimnagh, Dublin 12. March 28th 2023. Peacefully in the wonderful care of the staff of Portlaoise Hospital. Beloved wife of Thomas and deeply missed by her sons Eamonn, Bernard, John and Paul, daughters-in-law Marian and Colleen, friends Delia and Margaret, her adored grandchildren Katie, Lucy, Siobhan, Blathnaid and Tommy, extended family and friends.

In the 37 years I have been a priest I have probably celebrated close to a thousand Funeral Masses. At each of those funerals there was a little ritual at the beginning which we also did at the beginning of this funeral today. That ritual was to place a bible on the coffin of the deceased and to say the words *"in life Rita cherished the Gospel of Christ. May Christ now greet her with these words of eternal life: Come Blessed of my Father!"*

To be honest most of the time when I say those words I'm slightly uncomfortable because I'm making a statement that I have no way of knowing if it is true or not. In fact in many cases I may have a strong suspicion that it is not true. To say that someone *cherishes* something or someone is making a very definite strong statement. To say that this person *cherished* the gospel of Christ during their life is quite a claim to make. I'm drawing attention to this aspect of our funeral liturgy today because after my conversation with Tommy and Paul the other day this is one of those rare occasions where I think I can be quite confident in saying: *"in life Rita cherished the Gospel of Christ. May Christ now greet her with these words of eternal life: Come Blessed of my Father!"*

I have come to know that Rita loved the Word of God and she read it every day of her life. The somewhat frayed state of many of the pages of this bible which was Rita's is a testament to the truth of that statement. Through the pages of this bible Rita came to know her God, not in some

academic bookish way but came to know Him as a God of who loved her, a God of compassion and love and forgiveness. Rita had her favourite passages. She particularly loved Psalm 23 The Lord is My Shepherd which Margaret and Ann Marie have sung here today.

As I listened to you Tommy talk about how much Psalm 23 meant to Rita I was reminded of a story I heard some time ago. Years ago, the famous actor Richard Burton was given a grand reception in his childhood parish in Wales. While replying to the complimentary speeches in the parish auditorium he asked if there was anything, they specially wanted to hear from him. After a minute's pause his old pastor asked him if he could recite the Good Shepherd Psalm (Psalm 23), which he had taught Burton in his Sunday school.

A strange look came over the actor's face. He paused for a moment, and then said, "I will, on one condition—that after I have recited it, you, my pastor and teacher will do the same."

"I," said the old, retired pastor, "am not an actor, but, if you wish it, I shall do so."

Impressively the actor began the Psalm. His voice and intonation were perfect. He held his audience spellbound, and, as he finished, a great burst of applause broke from the audience.

As it died away, the old pastor rose from his wheelchair and began to recite the same Psalm. His voice was feeble and shivering and his tone was not faultless. But, when he finished, there was not a dry eye in the room.

The actor rose and his voice quivered as he said, "'Ladies and gentlemen, I reached your eyes and ears, but my old pastor has reached your hearts. The difference is just this: I know the Psalm, but he knows the Shepherd."

As well as Rita knowing the psalm more importantly, she knew the Shepherd

Sadly, many people in our Catholic tradition have little familiarity with the Word of God. For many years Catholic homes were not encouraged to have a bible in their homes and their only exposure to the scriptures was what was read at Mass. One of the things that helped to change that a little was the Charismatic Prayer Movement. This movement which was also ecumenical in character brought people of different Christian traditions to gather and pray together. What united them most of all was the scriptures and through the scriptures they came to greater knowledge and love of God. It was through the prayer group that Rita and Tommy came to truly 'cherish' the gospel of Christ but also in a slightly indirect way it was through the prayer group that Tommy and Rita ended up coming to live here in Rathdowney almost 27 years ago. I was very moved by this story and with permission I am going to share a somewhat abbreviated version of it with you at Rita's funeral today.

Almost thirty years ago Denis and Frances' Houlihan's three-year-old son Denis was very ill which necessitated him spending a long time in Crumlin Children's Hospital. Mutual Prayer Group friends of the Houlihan's and the O'Brien's, Charles and Marge Lambe from Roscrea (who I think are here with us today) asked Rita if she might visit Frances who was staying in Crumlin with her young son. Thus began a lovely friendship and when Tommy and Rita came down to Rathdowney some years later for Denis' First Communion, they decided that they liked the look of this community and some short time later moved from Drimnagh to their beautiful home on the Errill Road. In his own way, the Lord, the Good Shepherd led you to this place, Goodness and mercy have followed you here for the last twenty seven years and by your own testimony Tommy you have been very happy living in this community.

On behalf of this parish community, I want to extend our sympathies and support to you Tommy and to Eamonn, Bernard, John and Paul and your families. Tommy you have known Rita for almost 70 years since you first met at that Social in Dolphin's Barn. This coming September you will have been married 66 years. In that little card in your bible Tommy I saw that you had written in your own hand that beautiful prayer: *"Lord God, grant me the strength to care for Rita until you have to take her to yourself in heaven"* Tommy today is the day that prayer is finally

fulfilled. Today is the day when Rita goes to make her new home in one of those rooms in The Father's House as described in the gospel passage from St. John's Gospel which together with Psalm 23 was her favourite piece of scripture.

As she leaves us on her final journey today Rita might well look to those words from St. Paul to Timothy in that second reading *the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness.*

Rita may your gentle soul rest in Peace.