

Betty O'Brien RIP
Funeral Mass
Rathdowney Church
Saturday 20th January 2024

Betty O'Brien (nee Bracken), "Willowfern", Donaghmore, Co. Laois, January 18th. 2024, in her 98th. year, peacefully at Ballard Lodge, Portlaoise surrounded by her loving family and wonderful staff at Ballard Lodge. Predeceased by her husband Billy and son John. Sadly missed by her adoring family, daughters Mary and Jacintha, son Liam, sons-in-law John and James, daughter-in-law Deirdre, her grandchildren Barry, David, Gavin, Nicola, Shell, Yvonne, Bill and Aoibhe, her 13 great-grandchildren, her wonderful neighbours and large circle of relatives and friends.

Symbols: (YVONNE) Pen and notebook, (RORY) Family photograph, (MICHELLE AND JACK) Rosary Beads, (FIADH) Pearls, (AOIBHE) Knitting needles and wool, (JACK) Story book of old stories and rhymes she read to Jack, (NICOLA) Rathdowney Review

Readers: Michelle and Bill

Prayers of The Faithful: Emma and Cathy

Bread and Wine (3) Mary, Jacintha and Liam

Introduction Just a week before Christmas I had a wonderful visit with Betty in Ballard Lodge. While she admitted to me that she was only 97 she did tell me of her plans to celebrate her 100th birthday in June. I think she really wanted to get that cheque from Michael D. Anyway she tell me how proud she was to be the oldest living woman in the parish. I didn't have the heart to tell her that actually she was the second oldest woman in the parish. Mrs. Hasset out in Lisduff was actually two years older. However as you may know Mrs Hasset, Kathleen died on New Years Day so as far as I know, Betty was actually the oldest living woman in the parish for the first Eighteen days of 2024. So here we are gathered to say farewell to the oldest woman in our parish today.

Homily:

About five years ago The former US First Lady and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton together with her daughter Chelsea co-wrote a very interesting book called *The Book of Gutsy Women*. It is a collection of 100 essays about very strong formidable women who have made quite a contribution in their own communities and beyond. Some of them are well known, many are not. What they all share in common is a can do kind of approach to life often in the face of personal or community adversity. The reason I draw attention to this book is that I kind of feel that if Betty's fellow Wordsmith and chronicler of all things local, Niall O Doherty was minded to write a book with a title like '*The Book of Gutsy women in this area*' Betty O'Brien and her life story would most certainly feature prominently. Mind you Doc if you decide to write such a book and don't include the woman lying before the Altar today.....I wouldn't like to be around for the fall out.

Betty Bracken was born in Dublin on Tuesday 15th of June 1926 the second of seven children born to Billy Bracken of Gurteen Cullohill and Mary Conlon of Inchicore in Dublin. The family lived in Gurteen but Mary preferred to go back home to Dublin for the births of her children. Betty grew up in Gurteen and went to the local Gurteen Primary school. Even though she has spent the vast majority of her adult life totally committed to this parish community Betty remained fiercely loyal to and proud of her Cullohill roots.

After Gurteen Betty went on to the recently opened Vocational school or Tech here in Rathdowney. In those days you could only spend three years in the Tech but with a strong emphasis on Domestic Science for the female students Betty left school with a skill and a reputation as a very good cook and it set her up on a career path she enjoyed. Initially she worked in a shop in Mountrath for her aunt Nan Costelloe but she also regularly came home to help out on neighbours farms in Gurteen. In 1943 Betty moved to work in Gathabawn in the Parish of Lisdowney to work as housekeeper for the local priest, Fr. Marnell. After five years in Gathabawn Betty applied for the job of cook in the home of a retired British army colonel in Donaghmore. Little did she realise it but by accepting that job with Colonel Moss, Betty's life would change quite

significantly and it would make Donaghmore her home for most of the next seventy five years. While working in Donaghmore Betty's social life brought her to dances in Rathdowney, Killasmestia and Borris in Ossory and beyond. At one of those Ballrooms of Romance she would meet the man who would become her husband and the love of her life, Billy O'Brien from Garryduff in Errill. It was a bit of a whirlwind romance as they only met in March, got engaged in June and were married in Cullohill church in November all in 1953. Billy's mother decided to join them for their honeymoon in Dublin a development which did not go down well with the new Mrs. O' Brien. Billy and Betty initially lived in The Conoboro and later Kilbreedy. In 1960 the opportunity for them to own their own home came up when they bought a house back in Donaghmore. They demolished the existing house and built a new home from scratch. I'm reliably informed that Betty laid many of the blocks herself so perhaps she had not spent all her time in the Domestic science classes in the Tech.

As I reflected on Betty's life it struck me that there was a period of ten years from the mid seventies to the mid eighties that were particularly sad for Betty and Billy and their family. Betty's parents with whom she was very close died, her father in 1976 and her mother in 1986. Billy had a serious accident at work with Laois County Council when a bridge collapsed on him leaving him with a broken back and a prolonged stay at the Orthopaedic hospital in Kilkenny. In 1979 Betty's sister Nuala, a religious sister in Swansea in Wales went missing and to this day has never been found. But without a doubt the greatest sadness and heartbreak of Betty's life was back on the 1st of July 1978 when her oldest son John was killed in a car accident outside Abbeylax.

That was a huge amount of pain, loss and heartbreak in a relatively short period of time. How did she cope with all that? I believe it was through a combination of very strong human characteristics like resilience and determination together with a very strong belief and trust in her God and Mary his mother. Despite the challenges, setbacks and storms that came her way, Betty channelled her considerable energies into so many different projects and organisations in this community. One of first big campaigns was the provision of a bus service for children in the Donaghmore area who were attending school in Rathdowney. She

would encounter opposition from among others the local Parish Priest but that did not phase or deter her. Later there would be fundraising for the Community Centre, involvement with the Tidy Towns, Community Alert, Erkina House, ICA, The Red Cross, The Ossory Show, The Children of Mary, Raising funds and awareness of the plight of Irish Emigrants in London. For This latter project Betty was nominated for A Laois Person of The Year award. She was also elected Lady Mayoress of Rathdowney. Through all those years and indeed well into her 90's Betty reported all the local news for Rathdowney and Donaghmore in the Leinster Express, The Nationalist and the Tipperary Star. Betty never went anywhere be it wake or wedding and everything in between without her notebook and pen. To put in mildly she was very 'proactive' in gathering the local news and in many ways, she was a mixture of journalist and private investigator in the tradition perhaps of Miss Marple. I feel a reprimand stirring from inside the coffin so perhaps I won't go down that road too much further.

I hope this is some small snapshot into the very interesting life of the woman we honour with Christian burial today but I know there is so much more that could be said. When I was clearing away my Christmas cards last week I realised I got two cards from Betty this last Christmas. In the first one she had also written a lovely letter and then a second one arrived a few days after I had visited her in Ballard Lodge the week before Christmas. The second card really made me smile. I suspect one of ye up here was sent to get it. It says on the outside 'For You Friend' In the inside she told me among other things that I was her number One always. The reason I was smiling was because over the last twelve years there were times when our relationship hit a rocky passage and I certainly slipped down her premier league of priests. Normally it was because of sin of omission on my part and there wasn't even one card let alone two. As for the number One spot among Betty's priestly friends I'm well aware that there were times, parish priest or not, when I might not have had the privilege of celebrating her funeral mass. (I'm only sorry that some of those other guys with round collars are not here today so that I could wave this Christmas card at them.)

On a more serious note I think the reason why I liked Betty so much and why we got on, for the most part, was because she reminded me of my own mother. They were born within a few weeks of each other in 1926, they both reported the news for the local papers, both were very involved in their communities and had a similar approach to life which at times was fairly direct. Like my late mother, Betty, as many of you know was not beyond expressing her thoughts in a manner that was sometimes less than tactful.

Reflecting on Betty's life I could not help but think how important WORDS were in Betty's life. I understand that at a very early age Betty wrote a story in Gurteen National school which has now ended up in some National archive in Dublin. She has spent so much of her life finding the right words to describe really important moments and rites of passage in people's lives. She has shared those words with a wider public in the local papers or in the Rathdowney Review and they are words which were and still are really appreciated by so many people. As I read down through the many tributes on RIP.ie I thought how she would love to be reading those lovely words which people were using to describe their memories of her and her impact on their lives. But perhaps the most important word in Betty's life was the word *family*. Nowhere has the impact of Betty been more important than in the lives of all of you in these front seats here today, her grandchildren great grandchildren and extended family but most especially in your lives; Mary, Jacintha and Liam. For most of us in this church today we are here to pay our respects to woman who lived a long and fulfilled life. We are here because we knew her as a friend, a neighbour, a fellow parishioner, we may be here because we are friends with you, her family. But for the three of you it is very different. You have lost your mother, the one who was there with you from the beginning, who together with your father gave you your name and was there for all the firsts in your life, your first step, your first word. Your first tear and maybe even your first row. She was there for your weddings, the births of your children and many other happy and sad moments in your lives. Having come to know her over these years I think I can say that she was in many ways the quintessential Irish Mammy. She had her own unique relationship with

each of you. In the nicest possible way can I say that she knew which buttons to press with each of you to achieve pretty much what she wanted. (It was a tactic she may have employed with some of us her friends too!) Today, you are letting go of your mother and our sympathies and prayers go out to you in full measure at this time.

When I think of the importance of words in Betty's life I also think of another word that was so important to her and that was the Word of God. As a woman of Faith Betty was nourished by the Word of God and by the Eucharist which she participated in Mass in the church of her childhood in Cullohill, here in this parish in Rathdowney and so many other places as well. At Betty's funeral today The Word of God has brought us that gospel passage where Jesus uses the imagery of the seed being planted when He wanted to share something very profound with us about death and resurrection. Jesus speaks of how the seed, every seed has to go through the act of dying before any new life can appear above the ground. Yesterday as I was writing these reflections I looked outside my window at the frost covered barren landscape of my garden. But in one corner there is the appearance of fragile green shoots which in a few weeks' time will blossom with snowdrops and daffodils. In the midst of winter is the promise and hint of spring. In the midst of death there is the hint and promise of resurrection and new life. That very same mystery of nature is at the heart of our Christian faith. As Christians we believe that death, our death, is not God's final word in our regard. Yes, we die and yes like the seed, we are planted, buried in the earth but that act of dying and burial also gives way to a new life. Today is Betty's time to die and as we bring her later for burial we realise in faith that, Bealady cemetery becomes the gateway for her new and eternal life. We also find further reassurance for Betty in the Word of God proclaimed in the Book of Revelation "happy are those who die in the Lord! Happy indeed, the Spirit says; now they can rest for ever after their work, since their good deeds go with them"

Betty, we will miss you. May your gentle soul rest in Peace.