

Perhaps no other figure in all of Christian history has been more misunderstood than Mary.

Some who might not know much about our faith might think we actually worship Mary. And even some within our Catholic faith might think we pray to Mary in the same way we worship God. Or perhaps we might think of her as some kind of super saint in between in rank of Jesus or the other saints.

While much has been written and taught on Mary, the best way to think of her is someone who brings us closer to Jesus. Someone who helps us in so many ways on our journey, and who intercedes for us. Someone who reflects the best in humanity, and someone who loves us so much and is there for us, even if we aren't always aware of it, just like our earthly mothers are.

Take, for instance, the story of Joan Stamm, and her encounter with Mary.

Joan lived in a Catholic family, but as life went on, she drifted from the faith, eventually embracing Buddhism. But how she returned to the faith was due largely in part to the work of the Blessed Mother.

She reflects on the day her father died, the first day in Advent. Her father was someone who took his faith seriously, always going to Mass on the holy days and Sundays, and living a humble and honest life. Before he died, he got the anointing of the sick, but Joan also learned he confided to the priest his concern for his "fallen away" daughter, that daughter being Joan.

On the Feast Day of the Immaculate Conception, they held a prayer vigil for him at the funeral home. In an intimate, warmly-lit viewing room, a dozen family members gathered together in a circle around her father's open casket. He was dressed in a gray suit, white shirt and burgundy tie. The wood bead rosary she'd given him when her mom died was twisted through his folded hands.

Her cousin Gayle from North Dakota, the "devoted" Catholic as others in the family called her, came prepared to lead the family in a rosary. She offered two extra rosaries, a white and brown one, and placed them on the table in front of Joan and the others. "After we're finished," she explained, "I'll put the white rosary in your father's pocket. When it comes back to you, and I trust that it will, you'll know that your dad is in heaven."

Joan hadn't held a Catholic rosary for a long time, but under the spell of Gayle's unshakable faith, and certain now that the white rosary was imbued with Divine potential, she grabbed it off the table and felt it's tiny beads between her fingers.

Gayle chose to recite the Joyful Mysteries, reflections meant to help them enter into the ultimate causes and the deepest meaning of Christian Joy.

The old familiar words began - "Hail Mary, full of grace," as everyone responded "Holy Mary Mother of God pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death."

As they sat in the quiet serenity of the funeral home reciting the rosary, Joan recalled the night her father died. Her sisters and brother and Joan were staying at the hospice center where her dad had been transferred three days prior. It was her night to be with him, though by that point he lost consciousness and no longer responded to the presence of others. By 10 p.m., her siblings had left and Joan was alone with her dad in the quiet hospice as she listened to his labored breathing and the sounds that came both from his throat. Occasionally his arms twitched or his head jerked. Sometimes he furrowed his brow, a sign, according to the hospice literature, that he might be working out unresolved mental or spiritual conflicts.

Standing beside her father's bedside, Joan thought about the conversation he'd had with the priest at the hospital, the one about Joan leaving Catholicism for Buddhism. Afterwards, she told her father not to worry, that Buddhists and Catholics went to the same place. He said "I hope so, because I want to see you again."

Joan wanted to see her dad again too, in a place beyond religious differences and misunderstandings, beyond the suffering of aging, sickness and death.

While she watched the tightness gather in her father's face, she feared he might be grappling with the implications of their differing religious views in some deep region of his psyche. So she took out her Buddhist rosary, a strand of 109 beads, even though she felt awkward. She leaned in close to her dad and recited the "Hail Mary" out loud. Having heard the sense of hearing was the last to go, she hoped her father heard him. He died five hours later.

He was buried next to her mother. The Sunday after the funeral, Joan's cousins went back to North Dakota. On Monday, her siblings and Joan went back to going through the old things her parents had left behind. On the Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Joan was back at her parents apartment continuing to go through things and came to one final shoe box. She lifted the lid and found one more pile of tangled necklaces. She stuck her fingers into the mound and grabbed a handful, to examine if any of them were worth keeping. In the bottom, under a jumbled strand of black rhinestones and strings of fake pearls, something familiar shone through...the whitish color, the tiny little beads strung on a cotton cord, the cross...identical to the one her cousin had put in her father's pocket.

Joan pulled the white rosary out from under the heap and held it in her palm like a priceless jewel. Through tears of joy, she stared out the window and reveled in the wonder of sacred signs.

By the end of Advent, she had told the white rosary story to all her friends. The rosary's magic was beginning to work its way into her own deep psychic regions. Christmas Eve, as she left her sister's party and headed home, she thought about midnight Mass,

the sacredness of the coming hours and her dad's Catholic faith. He would have wanted her to celebrate the real Christmas, for he asked her often "Do Buddhists believe in Jesus Christ" he always asked her.

Joan exited the freeway and headed for Saint James Cathedral, saying if she could find parking she'd go to Mass. The parking was available, and for Mass she feasted on choral groups, brass ensembles, pipe organs and solos, all heralding the birth of Jesus. After the Archbishop held up the host and blessed the wine, the procession of worshippers rose to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, choirs sang "Silent Night" and Joan entered into the deepest meaning of Christian joy.

She didn't get home until 2 a.m., but wasn't tired. For the celebration of Christ's birth filled her with energy and the possibility of new beginnings. She looked over at her Buddhist shrine where she put the white rosary and picture of her father. The white rosary encircled her dad's photo like a ring of protection. And now, Joan knew, her process of reconciliation had begun.

Much like in Joan's story, Mary is out there with us. For just as a lifeline adds to our safety and security in the world, Mary's prayers and example add to safety and security in our spiritual lives. In real-life, firefighters often secure themselves with a lifeline as a way of enhancing their safety. Divers do the same before entering deep water. So do mountain climbers. The purpose is the link with others that offers a person in danger a reasonable degree of safety.

The rosary around her dad's picture may have been symbolic, but Mary was truly protecting Joan's father but also praying on behalf of Joan. And because of her father's devotion to the faith, and in particular to our blessed Mother through the rosary, that was instrumental in getting Joan to come back to Mass and start the process of reconciliation with her faith.

Today, as we celebrate the Assumption of Mary, we have the hope of following her to heaven.

Now you won't find the Assumption in the Bible; hence our reading is the Visitation. But while the dogma dates back to 1950, as way back as 451 when The Council of Chalcedon attested to her tomb being empty. The Assumption was celebrated since the early centuries of the Church. And it makes sense that she should be assumed into heaven as a representative of humanity to intercede for humanity. She is assumed into heaven to share in her Son's victory, but her assumption is an offer to us too. She is in the place prepared for us, and she will help us to get there. In heaven, Mary is now our mother for all eternity. Jesus gave us to her on the Cross, and she will lead us closer to her Son.

So with that in mind, I'd just invite you to do two things.

The first is to look to Mary and realize that from her, we can learn to have a pure heart. Joan's father from her story is a man who may have done much in life, but for him, he had his eyes always fixed on God. That's what Mary did too. Mary was able to love God purely and wholeheartedly. This is what allowed her to visit Elizabeth and make that difficult journey, thinking not of her own needs but of her cousin. This is what led her to not walk away from the Cross when others did. Our hearts can be divided; like Joan we can lose our way. Look to Mary and realize that inside of you is the potential for spiritual greatness, for when we look to Mary we are reminded of all that is good in humanity and how we can serve God with an undivided heart.

But secondly, realize that you are not alone in being an agent for what is true, right and good and that all is not always as it seems when we look at people and see the glass as half empty at times. I think most all of us know a Joan in our lives. Why isn't our church packed today as it is on Christmas or Easter? For today is an obligatory holy day. The answer is that many just do not see Jesus in their lives at all. They become focused on the fire, wind and earthquake that I preached on the other day - looking for happiness in other places, but not finding God. But we must never give up. My guess is that Joan's father prayed many a rosary for his daughter, and that in heaven he was also praying with Mary for her. And over time, these prayers had an impact. It can be very easy to get impatient with ourselves or other people. But through the example of our lives, and through our prayers, we can do such good, and truly bring people to God. This is also true for those who have died. We may have lost people and wonder still why they battled their personal demons, or never seemed to get God in. But remember, when we die, God can continue the transformation as we learn how to finally love him perfectly, and our prayers do much to help on that journey too.

In life it can be so easy to be impatient with ourselves or others. But we must never forget looks can be deceiving, and that God does have a plan. A big part of that plan was the gift that we were all given in our Blessed Mother Mary. When she held her Son's body, all seemed lost - but even though she was not aware of why this sword pierced her heart, her son triumphed over death, and welcomed His mother to her heavenly reward for trusting in God her whole life, but then He gave us the gift of her so that we could follow her there. May we never forget that whether we have lost our way at times, or know someone who has, there is always a light in the darkness. God's love is always there, and helping us to see it is Mary, who just as she enveloped Joan's father with her motherly love does the same for us. Like Joan, may we seek her out and trust in her to bring us and our loved ones step by step home to heaven through our earthly journey, never forgetting that Mary watches over us all with a mother's love, and thanks to that love like Mary, we too can reach our potential of sainthood.