

Witness Talk ~ Pam Collins
The Demands of Love
November 2, 2024 Ultreya

“If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners and get back the same amount”

Lk 6:33-34

My journey to radical love began on January 1st of the Jubilee year 2000 when, in my arrogance, I prayed for humility.

Just several weeks prior, in the last weeks of 1999, I was on a family ski vacation in MA with a recently acquired knee injury. Being unable to participate, I made my way to the National Shrine of the Divine Mercy in Stockbridge, while the girls took ski lessons.

At the time, a relic of Sr. (now St.) Faustina’s ankle bone was venerated daily, along with Mass, Adoration, the Rosary, the Chaplet of Divine Mercy and Confession. It was a very powerful experience, and I am still, even as I write this, experiencing consolations from this encounter.

In the quarter-century since, the Lord has shown me, time and again, that there is no such thing as too humble.

By far, and without a doubt, the most extreme example of this began on October 14, 2022, my daughter’s 26th birthday.

We had left the Hudson Valley earlier that morning after laying my mother-in-law to rest in the family plot the day before and visiting my mother on Long Island only days prior to that. Pulling into our hotel in Virginia for the night, I checked in on the app.

We were still in the car when I got a call from a (516) area code, my mother’s area code.

It was a Neurosurgeon.

There’s been an accident.

Minimal brain activity.

Are you familiar with her wishes.

Early the next morning, I got a call from a detective explaining to me that my mother was involved in a fender bender, while bringing food to a friend, and a 35-year woman, in a rage, pushed her to the ground where she sustained the fatal injury she was now suffering from.

Plenty of witnesses, he said.

Steve had appointments the next morning with the county for his imminent retirement, so I hastily arranged for a flight out of Baltimore and continued back to Long Island. Stunned, I didn't know what or how I felt. I turned on my Sacred Music playlist that began with Tantum Ergo. Still numb. What do I feel? Am I mad? I should be furious.

As I exited Brooklyn and arrived on Long Island, about twenty minutes from the hospital, the Ave Maria came on and I wept for this woman and what she had done to my mother, and I felt nothing but pity. Though I reserved the right to get angry, I never did.

Her name is Jeanette.

It would be 1yr and 10 months (95 and a half weeks; 669 days) until I would meet the woman who did this and get the closure that I was practically demanding. And it would take every moment of this hellish experience for God to bring me to where He wanted me.

The Lord had planted forgiveness in my heart, so, in the months prior to the sentencing date, I did some reading on Pope St. John Paul II, the only person I could think of offering that kind of radical forgiveness to the man who tried to murder him. I copied quotes from his encyclical, "Dives in Misericordia" to save and pray with when it was time to write my victim's impact statement:

"Violence is unworthy of man. Violence is a lie, for it goes against the truth of our faith, the truth of our Humanity"

"...the person who is the object of mercy does not feel humiliated, but, rather, found again and restored to value"

"in imploring mercy, people are restored to the Lofty Dignity that we have as children of God"

"Justice, in it's proper meaning, by it's nature tends to establish equality and harmony between the parties in conflict"

and his homily from the canonization of St. Faustina:

"This mercy, this love of God, is a mystery that teaches us that love is more powerful than death and is more powerful than evil, and is powerful enough to raise humanity from our state of sorrow into everlasting joy"

"The gentle face of Christ is offered...to show them the way and fill them with hope"

"May your message of light and hope spread throughout the world, spurring sinners to conversion, calming rivalries and hatred, and opening individuals and nations to the practice of brotherhood."

During this time, I learned, no, *experienced* how much Jeanette was loved by God. It was hard. It was painful. I've spent half my life trying to comprehend how much God loves *me*, and now He's calling me not just to forgive but to **love** the woman who violently ended my mother's life?

"Without cost you have received, without cost you are to give"
Matthew 10:8

Her suffering was added to my own and it was torment. The consolations I had experienced in the past were absent and the desolations were so acute that it was often a struggle to leave the house.

It took weeks to write my statement, with many revisions, so as to distill my words away from myself, and my feelings, and toward God's love for Jeanette. It was now *very* clear to me how precious she is to Him.

"What I say to you in darkness, speak in the Light"
~ Matthew 10: 27

When the day of the sentencing finally came, Steve, Jack and I were seated in a narrow hallway of the DA's Homicide Division, as I wanted the gift of relative silence in order to keep my disposition toward Jesus and His will for the proceedings. I opened my Kindle app to a book that a new friend had recommended and read:

"We want to come to have real *reverence* for this person who is so different from me."

And I prayed with this sentence until we were called.

On entering the courtroom, I was disappointed that the placement of the lectern would be facing the judge and not Jeanette, as I wanted to speak these words directly to her:

"I have been enormously blessed to have never felt anger toward you. Though the initial news was shocking and incomprehensible, the moment I arrived back on the Island, and through a pain that cannot be described, I have prayed for you and your family. I assure you that this was a miracle of grace because I have struggled mightily with anger, and I have worked long and hard at overcoming it. It is a thorn in my own side that I may always have to contend with, and the work will likely never end.

The work is not easy.

But I guarantee you, it is work worth doing.

I pray blessing over you and your family as you begin this work."

When I turned my head in her direction to speak what I had written, I saw that she had turned around to look at me, as did her attorney. She had been crying quietly from the beginning but now she was sobbing and nodding as we looked directly at each other. After Steve read Emily's statement and Jack read his, it was her turn to read what she had

prepared. She was so broken up that she was unable to finish. I couldn't really hear her words through the sobs, but she was repentant. Her attorney then spoke, his eyes welling up, saying that in his fifty-year career he had never seen anyone offer the forgiveness that he had just heard and that it restored his faith in humanity, which he repeated when we saw him in the hallway on our way out.

As we left the courtroom and we awkwardly moved past Jeanette and her husband she mouthed to me, "I'm so sorry" and I asked if it would be ok to hug her and she consented. While we hugged, or, rather, embraced, she kept saying that she would never forget my mother, a request that both Jack and Emily had made in their statements, and that she would honor her. Still sobbing, as I held her, she added, "I don't deserve this". Not really sure what she meant I responded, "of course you do, everyone deserves love".

And then we parted.

This change of heart was from a woman who was so angry that not only did she kill my mother in a rage, but initially tried to blame her for it on the scene. And there is no way that I came to feel compassion for her on my own so I can take exactly zero credit. I am a sinner and all sin grieves our Heavenly Father and He wanted her to *know* how much He loves her. Period. No conditions. He loves all of us equally.

I am grateful that she received it.

Almost as grateful as the day that I did.

St. Paul Patron of Cursillo, Pray for us

St. John Paul II, Pray for us

St. Faustina, Pray for us

St. Jerome, Pray for us

"Mary, Queen of Peace, Our Lady of Sorrows, pray for us, and help us to remember our love for our brother" Amen.