

Finding God's grace at the funeral of a beloved child



Photo by George Matysek

Just before Teresa's funeral procession began this morning, Fr. Christopher Whatley turned and placed his hand on the small pink casket behind him. That simple motion, that gentle touch, was so caring and pastoral, it brought tears to my eyes.

Father's gesture made me think of how our parish and community—and an international community far beyond Catonsville—has come together to embrace a little girl with a dynamic personality and a passion for life.

Fr. Whatley was the person Ann and Ed Bartlinski approached for counsel on whether to adopt little Fang Fang, whose medical condition was terminal. As Ann shared on her blog, the St. Mark's pastor told them, "The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God will not protect you."

The Bartlinskis' faith carried them to China to adopt Teresa, their fifth daughter adopted from China. That faith has carried them during the past three years of seeking a medical cure and miracle for Teresa. And it will continue to carry them in the days to come.

As I watched the casket move up the aisle, I thought about this little girl's journey. She was born in China to people who couldn't care for her but placed her where she would be found. On July 13, 2010, she walked into her mother's arms, smiling as she joined her forever family.

During the past three years, Teresa has captured so many hearts. In recent weeks, as she inspired others through her suffering and struggle to live, she started also capturing souls, bringing people closer to God through prayer. On Monday she completed her journey on earth, traveling into Jesus' arms.

As her mother told me when we spoke at the viewing yesterday, Teresa's work on earth is just beginning. Already Teresa is being credited with a miracle. That sounds just like Teresa, a child overflowing with love and spirit—and not wanting to waste any time.

As I spoke with Ann and Ed yesterday, I was struck by the strength they are finding in their faith, and by the joy and hope mingled with their sorrow. They had three amazing years with their baby girl, whose determination and magical personality and deep faith continue to be inspiring to people around the world.

It was this morning, though, as I watched Fr. Whatley prepare to celebrate Teresa's

funeral Mass, when tears first sprang to my eyes. I found myself remembering that Teresa used to throw her arms around our pastor after Mass, that she called him Jesus, that he helped make it possible for her to receive her First Communion at age 4, and that he was there with Ann and Ed when Teresa passed away on Monday.

At that moment, Fr. Whatley recalled, "I said to Ann, 'You have an angel in heaven.' And Ann said, 'No, Father. I have a saint in heaven.'"

This morning Fr. Whatley encouraged each of us to consider what Jesus is asking us to do. He spoke of Ann and Ed's response to Christ's call to adopt, and to adopt a child whose heart condition was almost certainly terminal. He invited the congregation to stand and clap for them, and we did, embracing them with our applause, gratitude, and prayers.

"Only by the power of God could one little girl change the world so," said Teresa's oldest brother, Eddy, who read a moving eulogy in memory of his baby sister. "Teresa's short life was a miracle and a testament of God's love."

So now the responsibility falls to us. What is Christ calling us to do? How can we live to honor the life of a little girl who wanted to spend many years on earth and is now enjoying eternal life in heaven? How will Teresa and her family continue to inspire you?

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