

In death, a reminder to prioritize life

Mario T. García | Mar. 18, 2014 NCR Today

It has been a few months since my last blog. For one, I was on sabbatical from my teaching position at the University of California, Santa Barbara and writing my biography of Fr. Luis Olivares, the charismatic Mexican-American Claretian priest who in the 1980s was the heart and soul of the sanctuary movement in Los Angeles.

The second reason for my absence from my blog had to do with the terminal illness of my father-in-law, who was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer in November, which deeply affected my wife and our concern for her father. When we returned from Santa Fe, N.M., where we were on sabbatical, we spent time, especially my wife, with her father. Christmas was a tempered and even sad time knowing that my father-in-law was dying. After much suffering, he died in mid-January. Finally, shortly thereafter, I came down with a nagging cough that I seem to only now be getting over. For all these reasons, including having to plunge back into teaching, I have been delinquent in my blog, but I hope to now resume on a more regular basis.

I want to say a few words about my father-in-law, William McCracken. Born of working-class Irish and Italian Catholic parents in Philadelphia, he grew up during the Great Depression and never finished high school. Both of his parents were deaf, so Bill, an only child, to some degree took advantage of this as he roamed the streets of Philadelphia. However, he and his parents were helped by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) as part of the New Deal of President Franklin Roosevelt. The CCC gave Bill a job and sent most of his pay to his parents, which helped them in these dire times.

Bill soon also joined the Pennsylvania National Guard, which also earned him some money. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, his unit was federalized, and Bill became part of the armed forces as the United States entered World War II. Bill was sent to the West Coast, where, while awaiting deployment to the Pacific war front, he met and courted his future wife, Claire Nugent. Island-hopping with the U.S. forces, Bill rose up the ranks and became an officer in military security. He was part of the retaking of the Philippines. Fortunately, he was not wounded and did not suffer any serious illness.

As part of the so-called Greatest Generation, Bill returned to California, where he married Claire and started his family. Lacking an education and too busy earning a living for a family that would eventually include six children, he did not take advantage of the GI Bill to return to school. He worked hard and took the best care possible of his family. This included being a barber and running his own shop in the Oakland area. His big break came in the 1960s, when he was hired as an inspector for the state of California. This helped him enter the middle class and allowed him to purchase a newly built home in Newark, Calif. Bill and Claire, who also began to work outside of their home, were especially proud that all six of their children went to college and earned degrees.

I knew Bill McCracken for many years. It's true that when you marry, you marry into a family, as I did when I wed his daughter Ellen. The McCrackens welcomed me into the family, and I grew to become very comfortable with them. Bill and I differed politically as he became more conservative and voted Republican, and I was on the other side of the political spectrum. At first, I was tentative to engage him politically at the dinner table where he held court; however, over the years, I began to do so, and we would have spirited debates that often

carried over to breakfast the next day -- he and I would have breakfast alone because we both are early risers. Bill could not cook but did make the morning "mush," always apologizing that it was not well prepared. It actually was.

It was hard to see Bill deteriorating. The last time I saw him before he was taken to the hospital where he later died, he looked at me in a lonely stare and said, "Well, Mario, I'll see you at some point," or words to that effect. I know I will see Bill again.

Bill's death, like my mother's death a few years ago, reminded me once again about our priorities in life. What do we want out of life? How do we want to spend the last years of it? Like everyone else, I get bogged down on petty issues -- in my case, with respect to departmental politics that are meaningless. Bill's death brought all this to my attention. Even then, I'm still struggling to maintain what should be my main priorities: my wife, family, research, and enjoying what is left of my own life. I feel the need to share this with readers because I know we all go through this and we all need reminders about our mortality and what our legacy will be.

I hope to be back now more regularly on the blog, and I am sorry for being away from it the last few months.

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