



Homily at the Funeral Mass of Marion K. Coffey

Gregory O'Meara, S.J.

This past winter, Marion K. Coffey passed away at the age of 87. Coffey was the wife of the Hon. John L. Coffey, L'48, of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, and had numerous other connections with Marquette University Law School. She was as well a noted painter; in the words of Mike Johnson, author of her obituary in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, "[t]here was something about art that touched Marion Coffey's soul, and she used her talents and good nature to brighten the lives of those she encountered, from people she met on Milwaukee street corners while painting to those who purchased her creations." Her nephew, Rev. Gregory J. O'Meara, S.J., associate professor of law at Marquette University, delivered the homily at her funeral Mass in St. Monica Catholic Church in Whitefish Bay, Wis. With his permission, and that of Mrs. Coffey's children, Peter L. Coffey, L'84, and Lisa C. Robbins, we share it here—together with some of her artwork.

From the book of Jeremiah, in today's reading: "Go down to the house of the potter, and there I will impart my words to you."

Note: God does not speak to the prophet, or to us, in the places we expect. There is no Garden of Eden here, no burning bush; God does not reveal his law on the mountain; nor does he make his will known in the Temple, or cry out in the wilderness.

Rather he instructs Jeremiah to go down to the lower part of Jerusalem—near the well of Siloam, where potters and other craftsmen had easy access to water to ply their trade. There, on the threshold of the artist's studio, God draws Jeremiah's attention to the potter at the wheel, who keeps working on the same vessel, re-fashioning it if it is spoiled. In the eyes of the artist, this lump of clay is filled with possibilities.

And only after Jeremiah's observations does God speak: "Just like clay in the hands of a potter are you in the hands of God. . . ."

In this conscious echo of the creation story in which God fashions human beings from the clay of the earth, Jeremiah identifies the labor of the artist as holy—as revealing how God works in our lives. . . .

Hold that thought—as we make an intuitive leap.

A proverb teaches that "eyes are the windows of the soul." Ordinarily, the aphorism suggests that, by looking within the eyes of others, we can see who or what they are. In Marion's case, we met her soul not only by gazing in her eyes; but also, through her painting, she gave us the breadth of vision, the crystalline purity, of how she saw the world.

And so, what lessons might we gain by standing on the threshold of her studio, in her daughter's home, where she was surrounded by family and friends, whom she needed every bit as much as potters in Jeremiah's time needed water? In the midst of apparent chaos, with steel drums playing in the background, and canvases upon canvases heaped, Marion would remind us with each brush stroke how wonderful life can be.

By means of her disciplined eye; her delicacy in distinguishing hue, color saturation, and grayscale; her sometimes whimsical sense of form, line, and perspective; and her unerring ability to focus on the spiritual center of what she perceived, Marion invited us to see what we so often miss to our detriment.

Through Marion's vision of the world, we were given the privilege of seeing our lives laden with the profound beauty of everything: from rocks, leaves, and flowers to old laundromats and Masai tribesmen, from octagonal barns and vases tumbling forth daisies to cows and castles far more colorful than those portrayed in mere photographs. >>



Photo: Troy Freund

Marion Coffey



Three of Marion Coffey's paintings: Above, *Kenya Zebras*; near right, *Abbey de Senanque*; far right, *America 2001*.



For Marion, ours is a world made manifest both in quiet tranquility and brassily shouting forth, a riot of color and joy!

Though she may not have put it this way, by looking through Marion's eyes, we can begin to understand that God continues to take delight in creation, to look at this world and see it as very good.

"Blessed are the clean of Heart, for they shall see God."

But the lessons Marion taught us were not just those inscribed in pigment and composed on raw linen. By the very integrity of her life, she gave flesh to these ideals set forth in First Corinthians 13. In her slightly quirky but strong hand, we have the card she copied out for her grandchildren. And, as might be expected of an accomplished painter, the words are in a real way superfluous, for one need only look at the canvas of her life to see what St. Paul was talking about.

She really *was* patient, kind, never boastful or conceited. She didn't put on airs.

In Marion, we knew someone who kept no score of wrongs and was always ready to make allowances to

trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes. The chapter from which this passage is taken concludes, "There are three things that last—Faith, Hope, and Love, and the greatest of these is Love."

Perhaps because I share the cussedness of most law professors, I want to draw your attention not to the worthy virtues of love or faith; rather, I would like to consider the oft-neglected virtue of hope. Recall our friend Jeremiah; the prophet observes that God sees himself as akin to the artist who keeps kneading the clay until the vessel comes out right.

This should give us hope. For if, like Jeremiah, we stand on the threshold of Marion's studio and see how she sees the world, we could do worse than understand God as someone who saw the world as charged with the unfailing beauty that inhabits Marion's painting, that defined and shaped her life on earth. Perhaps our prayer really must be that God look at us, and the sometimes shapeless lumps of clay we can be, and see us through Marion's eyes, knowing us to be just as beautiful and as loveable as she did.

If we can rightfully grasp that hope, then we too can rejoice and be glad, for, when God shares Marion's vision, our reward, like hers, will indeed be great in heaven. ■