

Eileen went home

During the past few weeks, one phrase has been my constant companion. I knew why it was there. I knew it was there in anticipation of a certain day and now that certain day has arrived.

The passage is a scriptural passage from the book of Revelation. It says, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. Let them find rest from their labors for their works accompany them.” (Rev. 14:13)

The phone call came at 1:30 a.m. on Saturday morning, March 2, 2013. Our sister, Eileen, had died in Coventry, England, after battling cancer for almost nine months. Then, I knew the reason for the scripture passage and how it was to become the summation of Eileen’s life.

Maybe, that phrase was given me in order to capture succinctly the life, times, and love of Eileen. It becomes the lynchpin that reflects most effectively her journey in life and in death.

Eileen was a fighter in the ring of life. She fought for the hearts, minds and souls of people she cared about, especially those who were on the fringes, those who had no one else to care for them, those who were ostracized, those who were physically and emotionally challenged.

She may have been smaller in stature than the rest of her brothers and sisters but that did not deter her. Her real stature was not in the size of her human frame, but in the size of her heart; a heart that overflowed with compassion, love, and concern.

Eileen was a middle child sandwiched between an older sister and brother and a younger brother and sister. She probably never heard of a middle child syndrome. If she did, she surely debunked it. She didn’t remain sandwiched for long. She fought her own battles in school and life, not only hers but all those who needed a voice, a support, a lift up, a shoulder to lean on, a caring heart, a determined spirit.

Easter Monday was one of her special days; the day to take her group of physically and mentally challenged people to her favorite place – Lourdes. She did it year after year for twenty one years.

Her dinner table had room always for a friend, a stranger or someone who casually dropped in. This was true especially at Christmas and Easter when she always invited those, who were alone for the holidays and had no one to care for them, to her family festive table.

On August 5, 1972, a neophyte and nervous priest – yours truly - performed his first wedding at St. John Fisher Church in Coventry. The couple were Eileen Tracey and Michael Martin. I was warned by Eileen not to address her by her given names during the exchange of vows. Instead, I was to simply address her by the name she cherished, Eileen. I duly obliged. Otherwise, I would be reprimanded severely.

Every time, I would call from Mississippi, especially at Christmas and Easter, her one question was: “When are you going to retire? Have you sent in your letter yet?” She would then pressure me into giving her an answer. When my retirement was finally accepted, she was one of the first I told. Now, it seems ironic that I should be retired in time for the funeral of a sister who never gave up on me, on her family or on anyone who needed a word of encouragement, a trailblazer to plough a furrow ahead for those who were too weak or didn’t have the stamina to fight another battle with life.

Little did she know that that same stamina was needed in her own battle with cancer. She battled it with determination and faith that carried her through into eternity.

When she began that battle, little did she know how many friends she had and the lives she touched during the decades of her life. Hundreds of friends and strangers she never met but touched gathered for all night vigils of prayer. Special Masses were said and the constant trail of people to her doorstep was a fitting testimony to her lasting impact.

I, too, had the privilege of saying Mass in her home in August during my vacation and again in January, during my retirement. She drew strength from the Eucharist all her life and how the Lord fed her and she, in turn fed others who crossed her path. It gave her not only the strength to be involved totally in her parish but also the strength to carry her own cross of cancer without question, bitterness or resentment.

Now, I know in the days ahead, as I ponder some more the impact of my sister, Eileen’s profound impact on people’s lives, I will still revert back to that scriptural passage, knowing that she died in the Lord and her deeds have gone before to a place where they really matter.