

# Transfiguration

A time to die

By Dr. Maxine Hancock

MY 87-YEAR-OLD MOTHER HAD SAT BESIDE my nearly 90-year-old father through the last days of his life, stroking his arm, holding his mostly unresponsive hand. Despite her profound cognitive losses, she knew he was dying; knew that the nearly 66 years they had spent as husband and wife were coming to a close. Each day, when she grew too tired, we would take her back to the extended care hospital where they had lived for the past year, so she could have a meal or rest for an hour or two. When, late one summer afternoon, we realized we were in the final hours with my dad, my sister and brother-in-law went to bring her over from the nursing home. Quite suddenly, just minutes before they got back, our dad gathered his final breath and died.

For the past several years our tiny shrunken mother had lived in a quiet personal fog of incomprehension and confusion. But when she came into the hospital room where our father's body lay, she was immediately clear: "Oh, so then he's gone, gone home to be with the Lord," she said. "Oh, but I wish I could have been here with him when he left." We felt her disappointment, and told her, helplessly, how sorry we were, too, that he had slipped away before she had arrived. "It's all right, dears," she said, "I'm not blaming anybody. But oh, I did want to be with him." She smoothed his white-gold hair back from his brow and laid her hands over his until they were cold.

We did, then, the things that had to be done: vacated the room so that the death could be verified; used that time to call some of the family. And then we circled the bed once more: to pray and commit our father to the Lord he had so dearly loved and to gather the few things from windowsills and closets. "Well," we said to each other, "that's about it . . . there's nothing more



we can do here." Outside the window, we could see a black late-day summer storm brewing. But our mother was not quite yet ready to leave. She started to rise from her chair, and then her hands fluttered. "Oh," she said, turning her face to us with that blank, lost look we had come to know as hers. "There seems to be something I still wanted to do. Something to be done. Oh dear, I don't remember what it was."

### It was a simple, clear, startlingly priestly prayer.

We paused in our leave-taking, waiting for her. And then, without another word of explanation, our mother bowed her head and began to talk to the Lord. She, who had spoken few coherent sentences in the past year, suddenly prayed with power and authority, with clarity and coherence:

"Dear Lord, thank You for Max and for the life he shared with us. Thank you for taking him to Yourself. Now I pray in Jesus' name that every one of our children, and our children's children, will find the same doorway into life that Max has just passed through, by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen." It was a simple, clear, startlingly priestly prayer: our mother, who had always deferred to our father, had, in his death, taken up the spiritual headship of the family. She prayed, empowered by the Spirit and her own deep understanding of the ultimate issues of life and death. She prayed, not as the frail, lost, little woman we had come to know, but as the woman we had known as our mother – a competent, intelligent woman, clothed in strength and dignity.

Just as she finished her prayer, the first great slashes of lightning cut across the black southern sky, and a thunderclap followed – one of those amazing prairie thunderstorms that builds until it demands a catharsis of unleashed torrents of rain. My sister said, "Look! Heaven shares our sorrow." "No," said mother. "It's the overflow of heaven's joy being poured out in blessing on

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the earth." We took her back to her nursing home room through this great rainstorm. Half an hour later, by the time the nursing staff had brought her tea and a sandwich, a shimmering rainbow arced across the sky, right over the cross that topped the steeple on a neighbouring church she could see from the window of the room she and my father had shared.

Under the renewed promise of God's steadfast love, our mother began her brief, dementia-buffered widowhood. But while others would see only a little lost woman, my sister and I had seen her transfigured. There, at my father's bedside, we had glimpsed the glory of her inner self, shaped by her long marital love and her intimacy with God. We had been granted a preview of that glory she will be robbed with when we see her, one day, on the other side. ●

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