

A Mother's Best Friends – by Fr. Dean McFalls, May 10th, 2007

One of my favorite moms is a tiny, big-hearted widow who helps us out from time to time. She's suffered loneliness and discouragement since her beloved husband of thirty years passed away four years ago. I came into her life in a hospital not far from here in the year 2001. No, I wasn't born then. Rather, her husband was undergoing treatment for kidney failure.

In 2002, we celebrated their Catholic wedding in their Manteca home. In November of that year, Ruben passed away. Since then, despite the love and support of her sons and daughter, caring for her grandchildren, and a deep Christian faith, Mary has fought depression and a sense that life has lost its meaning. So any signs of encouragement make a big difference for Mary. And she'll call me immediately to share the latest good news.

Last Monday, Mary was out washing her car. As the water puddled up, one of those elegant light-tan doves swooped in for a bath. Watching it splashing itself, she remembered a long-lost friend. Years ago, when her children were young, they attended a Portuguese celebration in the MRPS Hall. There, one of the parish queens present carried a carefully decorated basket. Inside was a pure white dove. But the girl knew nothing about bird safety. While Mary winced, she swung the basket around and around.

“Pull out the dove,” said the girl's mother, “and we'll take your picture.”

The little queen cradled her bird like an inexperienced mother, but the poor creature was too dizzy to sit up straight. Then, recovering its senses, the dove darted off to safety. But, no. Still suffering vertigo, it flew directly into the path of a pickup truck. Mary cringed as the windshield struck that innocent dove with a sickening thud. Bouncing off the truck, the victim rolled under a car – *under Mary's car*. When the queen's friends tried to retrieve the wounded bird, they only came up with fistfuls of tail feathers.

Somehow, Mary's kids coaxed the dove out and turned their car into an ambulance. Fully convinced they would take the broken white ball home to bury it, they had a surprise coming. With a generous mix of nurturing and dove-feed, that hopeless case became a healthy pet for years to come.

They had to name him “Goofy”. Maybe that concussion left him bird-brained. Whatever the cause, this dove seemed to forget it was a bird.

Whether pecking at your white socks, or scaling your arm sideways to coo in your ear, or making friends with the local cats, Goofy was different.

On hot days, Mary would spray her beloved dove in its cage. Far from protesting, Goofy would raise up his wings, one at a time. Then he'd shift around on his perch to maximize his soaking, finally ruffling his feathers.

There comes a time in the life of every normal bird when the presence of a member of the opposite sex seems to be highly beneficial. Assuming the same would be true for Goofy, his caring family brought him a girlfriend.

Before long, they found the female lying in the cage's base, stone dead.

Baffled and shocked, they waited some time before bringing in another female. This time, the new pair seemed very happy together. At last, the bird they had witnessed rising from the ashes of death would be able to prolong his existence through the birth of other doves just like himself.

But two months from the day they first met, Goofy went to his final reward.

Spraying her welcome stray dove, watching it behave so much like the one who died, Mary couldn't help but reflect on the many ways Ruben seems to have sent signs of his continued presence since he left her to fly off into the sunset. I don't know what happened to that new friend of hers. But I do know one thing: two Saturdays ago, on a particularly cold and windy day, when the rains came down in torrents, we had two remarkable visitors.

At the conclusion of the noon Quinceañera, three doves identical to Mary's carwash companion were released outside our church. Apparently, the homing pigeons had no intention of homing at all. One dove directly into the sanctuary, and the others took up refuge under a dense rosemary bush.

Efforts to help the bird out produced only trauma and dislodged feathers. So, remembering a previous experience, I told everyone to let the dove remain. A few months ago, a sparrow had accidentally entered the church. As we approached it, the bird darted straight into the window. Dropping straight to the floor, it went into convulsions. Giving the Lenten season, I wrapped the patient in white cloth and placed it in a small basket on the altar. We proceeded with Mass. During the consecration, when we recall the words by which Jesus transformed bread and wine into his own Body and Blood as the Lamb of Sacrifice, the fallen sparrow breathed its last.

This time I resolved to not to startle the bird. She took up her perch on the extended arm of a large cross. Throughout the following Mass, she sat there quietly, observing us like an angel from heaven. Following the celebration, I walked outside with the participants, only to find the other two doves huddled under the rosemary. Within moments, one of them had flown into the church. There, with a greater guarantee of privacy, the two began cooing. The church echoed with their mournful, yet moving, song.

Soon, the second dove found its place on Our Lady of Guadalupe's head. Throughout that evening's Mass, it didn't budge. However, the first dove did. I had spoken during the 2:00pm wedding about the passage in the Song of Songs describing a dove hidden in the cleft of a rock. Explaining how that can mean, for Christians, that the innocent must take refuge in the strength of Christ, I watched, amazed, as that bird landed upon a large ornamental stone located at the feet of the statues of Jesus and his Mother.

Needless to say, I didn't have the heart to chase the doves out that night.

With the crack of dawn, elders arrived to prepare the church for Sunday's masses. It goes without saying that, being practically minded, they chased the birds out immediately. Fortunately, the sun was rising unobstructed.

I quietly cleaned up the droppings. But I registered my protest, and my desire to preserve some relic of the heavenly visitation, by leaving poop on that rock. Worshippers can find that sign of God's favor to this very day.

I record all these bird tales in honor of our mothers. Last Wednesday, as masses were celebrated marking the ninth day since the burial of two of our mothers (Magdalena, who died after a full life, and Lola, at nineteen), the sacredness of motherhood struck home again. I had visited a young mother in jail that afternoon. She faces the prospect of years behind bars, separated from her children. Shortly afterwards, I had gone to see a young mother who has recently received word that she may have terminal cancer.

Yes, it was important for me to provide lodging for those doves in our church. Goofy never succeeded in leaving behind any chicks. And the "chicks" he did know either died, or watched him do the same. Maybe my resident feathered friends would have raised an entire flock for the parish.

That didn't happen. But this Sunday, as we honor our Mothers, we can certainly celebrate all those who have brought life into the world, who've nourished children from existence into full-feathered life. Whether caged

in trials and tribulations, beaten by troubles and tragedies, or gently rinsed by the shower of Saving Grace and cradled in a compassionate embrace, our mothers deserve all our gratitude and heartfelt congratulations. Even those broken women who were never able to live fully the calling of their feminine nature - especially those who abandoned or abused their children - need our understanding, our forgiveness, and our prayers. Every woman is created to fly up into the light of the Father's glory, but not all are able.

My hope is that our Mothers can find a comfortable perch in the church of their choosing – the church which the Lord has chosen for them – and from this stable place can be fruitful in the ministry for which they are gifted.

There are as many places in the house of God and the community of faith as there are individuals. Some will come to flourish; some will come to suffer and die, but all will have come to just the right place. In the end, any true church is never a cage. It is rather a pool of refreshing water, a shower of divine blessings, and a loving relationship with the One who never dies, and in whom we will never die. There, Jesus speaks his words of Everlasting Life with a voice as beautiful as flowing waters and the song of a thousand doves. There, Jesus restores our wings and helps us fly.

There is our Rock of Refuge, the Altar receiving our humble sacrifice, and the quiet space where our bodies will lie when our final Mass is celebrated.

And there, in the silence of the night, stands the woman who made it all possible. She is the one who, long ago, carried Jesus in the delicate basket of her youthful womb. Unlike that unknowing Portuguese girl, this Queen was ready at any moment to lay down her life on behalf of her Son. And in the end, as he hung dying on the cross, she took refuge in the Promise of Resurrection which he had so often made. Now, like the doves perched on the cross and upon the crown of her head, Our Lady vigils over the Church.

She also intercedes in a special way for Mothers. May all of our mothers sense the comfort of her presence, the warmth of her embrace and the blessed assurance that the Lord has everything securely in his loving hands.

I want to thank my mom publicly for bringing me into the world. As I was finishing these final paragraphs, the exact moment of my birth passed by. I came into the world on the morning of May 10th, on the same year that the young man whose name I bear met his untimely death. Out of respect for my mom, instead of bars and motorcycles, I hang out in the Church.