

THE TIME JOE MATHEWS DIED

We in the Order knew it was coming. The cancer that was discovered two months ago had ravaged Joe's sturdy frame leaving it jaundiced, haggard and weakened. His eyes had seen through; they had always been Joe's strongest dramatic feature, and now they displayed the terror and fascination of death itself. Despite our reluctance to face up to reality and all our hoping and wishing that it were not so, we knew it was coming.

He knew it was coming. Indeed, looking back on the past year, one can almost believe that the illness, the emergency operation, the devastating discovery, the brief respite and the rapid decline were all foreseen and well prepared for. He wasn't interested, he had said when the shortness of his remaining time was communicated, in prolonging his life for the sake of more time. The only thing that concerned him was expanding his arena of effective potential. So he came home from the hospital, knowing as he walked through the Institute offices, that it would be his last time.

He was prepared for death. In fact virtually every talk he had ever made referred to death and the necessity to face that inevitable fact as a precondition to living a profound life. But, he said, he had not been ready for the pain, suffering and loneliness that accompanies dying. He had been reflective lately, and quiet. Those who knew him assumed that, as was his custom, he was living his own living and reflecting on that, and that he would say nothing about it until some conclusion was reached.

We were ready as a community could be for the certainty that was immanent. Joe was attended around the clock by Lyn and a couple of close colleagues. The rest of us kept a respectful distance. As the time drew obviously near, a small group drew aside to make detailed plans. There were arrangements to be made, a service to be prepared, housing to be readied, food to be cooked, transportation to be handled, decor to be put into place; the announcement event was designed and a schedule worked through which would, without slowing down the mission, provide a way for everyone to be engaged in creating a funeral celebration fit for the times and the man. Joe himself had dictated the values: wholly within the historic Church; victorious, not tragic; objectively liturgical; honoring God, not man. Cremation was his wish with a desire to be placed in the niche nearest his son. The mausoleum was contacted and the space secured. His brother was reached aboard ship in the Mediterranean and returned home immediately. Everything was prepared.

As the medical prognosis shortened from a matter of days to a matter of hours, more visitors were invited to come by to see Joe. He had hoped for one last meeting with the Order's leadership, but that was not to be. So we visited as individuals and couples--half expecting to "say goodbye" or to "be comforting," and finding ourselves ever so gently called to account once more. "What's happening?" "How's it going?" "How did you do that?" "What're you going to do next?"

The plans were all in place. But now on Friday a weekend program began involving 250 business and professional people from all over the country who, for six months, had been planning this consultation on major issues facing the task. It was too late to cancel this event, even if that were desirable; besides, death might delay its coming. So a "Plan B" was developed to handle all things with decorum even if Joe died in the midst of the weekend.

Sunday morning early, the doctor concluded that a few hours remained. By mid-morning, representatives of the Order, the Church, the family and the Movement gathered to conduct a final prayer service with a conscious but inaudible Joe. Protestants do not have a rite of Extreme Unction as an established sacrament; but this service, adapted from the Anglican tradition, pronounced by prayer and anointment the Word of God in this occasion: You are about to die, and that, too, is of God.

We filed out.

Those who remained sang--songs from the Church, love songs, songs from local communities and spirituals. Then the doctor nodded and the bishop intoned, "In the year of our Lord 1977 on the 16th day of October at high noon, Joseph Wesley Mathews died. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost."

The word trickled out slowly at first and then in quiet torrents. Only for a moment was it considered to make the announcement publicly at once. The Guardians Meeting had only a closing luncheon to bring it to completion, and many of those present knew nothing of Joe or of his significance to the Order. The decision to make the announcement at the end of the feast was quickly adopted.

The closing speaker, having finished his remarks on "The Life of Destiny", read a brief statement, and the entire body moved to the worship hall, there to mark a profound moment before the One who gives everyman his life and who takes his life away. The Scriptures and prayers and witness, chosen well in advance, were classic statements of the Word. The meeting of the Order in residence which followed was a time of quiet reflection on what had happened and of receiving assignments to the practical tasks preparing for the funeral.

Meanwhile the family sent word that those who wished were invited to come pay their last respects to Joe. We walked, that time, up the four flights to the Mathews apartment. Families went together, standing silently in the line that was slowly moving towards the room. Joe was there, awesome in his death. The colors and scars and wrinkles, earned by living and dying a profound life, were unmasked. Lying there dead, he once again exercised the vocation he had named for himself: disclosing the Other World in the midst of this world. He bore silent witness to God--not the God of wish-dreams or romantic ideals, but the God of reality. WE went away moved deeply--not by grief or fear, but by the strange gratitude of having been privileged to set foot on ground recently made sacred by the presence of Mystery.

In due time the undertakers arrived--two young men with a stretcher--rather obviously accustomed to far less order than exhibited here. The forms were signed with the matter-of-fact practicality that in other circumstances serves as a healing diversion from the awful reality of death. But reality itself was here the healer. Two sons and two Order members placed Joe on the stretcher and made their way past colleagues standing in silence to the hearse.

Simultaneously the phoning began. All 103 of the Order's locations in 23 countries were to be notified. And there were special friends, extended family, dignitaries and colleagues who would choose in some way to participate in the event. Likewise preparations began for the influx of people anticipated for the funeral. Practical

work, when done in a thoughtful plan and not as the busyness that evades reality, is a healthy response. We worked and were cared for. But work alone will not suffice. We began a Vigil (the Church was wise in naming its rites "liturgy"--"work") in which everyone took shifts. This continued around the clock from the time of death until the time of interment. Standing for an hour in the Prayer Chapel two by two, people silently or vocally rehearsed the realities of life and death in the Word. We worshipped and were cared for.

Monday the inevitable trip to the funeral home was necessary. A box was required to transport the body to the place of cremation, and we who were familiar with current funeral practices wondered how best to honor Joe's passionate identification with the poor and his equally passionate desire for simplicity in such matters. A plain pine coffin was not available, we were told; only the county morgue used them, and private funeral homes had no access to them. Fortunately however, the director was understanding and made no attempt to sell us on the polished mahogany or bronze and steel pieces that lined his showroom. We settled on what the trade calls a "shipping box," a plain wooden casket covered with gray felt (feebly attempting to disguise the temporality of its construction and its contents) used to transport bodies from one city to another.

At the crematory Joe's cross was removed and, in the presence of an attendant, two funeral directors, one son and two Order representatives, ^{his} Joe's body was committed to the ages in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost

The mausoleum had a niche reserved for the interment. Having once endured the indignity of delivering remains after the funeral of a son to the office for later placement, the family determined that a more appropriate symbolism was required on this occasion. Once again the director was cooperative and arrangements were made to hold a brief service before the niche and then for the ashes to be immediately sealed in place. The stonecutter engraved a simple Congolese Cross--symbol of the Order: Ecumenical--to mark the spot. In preparation for the funeral itself a plain pine box was constructed--10½ inches cube--to contain the urn. On its hinged top was a simple brass plate bearing Joe's name and dates.

Two days later the "cremains" were ready. We arrived with the box and received them over the counter at a nondescript office that might, save for the headstone samples on display, have served as a used car sales place. Somewhat unceremoniously we tore open the masking tape sealing the cardboard package and removed the small metal urn placing it gently in its pine container. On arrival at the Institute a procession silently moved the box to the prayer chapel where, along with the Vigil, four persons stood watch. It was high noon on Wednesday, and those gathered marked this moment with the service of Sext from the Canonical Hours of the Church.

On Wednesday night the Liturgy task force made its report on the plans for the coming day. It was to hold three main divisions--Preparation, Dramatization and Affirmation. Their work sought to bring ritual consciousness to the deeply human events surrounding a funeral. In the Act of Preparation, representatives of the Order stood watch over the casket. The group, gathering at breakfast, rehearsed detachment from temporal goods and relations through the exercise of a fast. In the Act of Dramatization, one hour before the service, the pine box was carried in silent procession to the worship hall and met there by liturgists who received it as the Church with a brief service of Scripture and prayers. The sound of that service echoing through the hallways gave those standing in line the sense of the eternal as the Church that transcends time again spoke its Words of witness to God.

At the appointed time, the great drama began. We confessed together our failure to take confidence and comfort in life's ultimate Mystery and received once again the healing Word that Being was yet faithful even to us. We then rehearsed our corporate gratitude for participation in life itself. Then came the Act of Dedication--in this case, dedication of a completed life to the One who had guarded it in living and dying. So we spoke his life and rendered it to the Mystery. The witness, the Obituary and the Eulogy each held up a dimension of Joe's life, celebrated it as it had been and offered it to God. The community responded in prayers of consolation, resignation and grace. Then the symbols of Joe's temporal covenants were brought forward and placed inside the box--the wedding ring representing his many years of marriage, the Order ring representing his covenant with the religious, the blue shirt symbolizing membership in the global movement of Those Who Care, and finally the cross representing Joe's unflagging commitment to the historical Christian Church. His relations were now completed and forever secure in history. And we who had participated in them were now free to move into the future. There was one task left--to dramatize the placing of Joe in the good earth. For this act, the box was brought to the high altar and members of the family, the Church and the Order each took a handful of dirt -- from Fifth City where Joe had worked and sweated and struggled to build a model for local community renewal -- and heaped it on the box in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. We filed out with the singing of "For All the Saints" to a new life.

The third part of the day paralleled the first. In affirming the fact we had so recently celebrated, we feasted. A plentiful buffet was set, and it became a time of re-engagement. Conversation turned easily to the mission, the accomplishments of the past and dreams of the future. This event flowed easily into songs and dancing the victory we had experienced. In this act, those gathered symbolized the plentitude of life, acknowledged the responsible completion of their responsibility for this event and moved back again to re-engage in the task of Those Who Care.

We had planned for the interment to occur immediately. But a number of colleagues en route from India were being held up by flight delays until late evening. We decided to wait for their arrival and quietly re-posted the Watch one more night. The next morning several carloads of people journeyed to the mausoleum and in the out-of-doors amidst a brisk Fall breeze, intoned once more the words of faith on the occasion of death. As people filed away, the family suggested that the Fifth City dirt, now resting on top of the box with the sign of the cross someone had drawn on it, should be included with the other symbols of Joe's covenants. So it was dumped in.

The whole event was carried off with the utmost decorum and solemnity without falling into coldness that negated human feelings.

Joe once said that the reward for a life of authenticity in the struggle with Being was, at the time a death when Being is finally the victor, a wink--wort of a cosmic recognition of friendship between God and the self.

After the service a few of us stayed behind to witness the placing of the ashes into their niche. An elderly overalled workman rolled his adjustable platform ladder into place and carried the box up to place it inside the 11-inch space. The box had been carefully constructed to 10½-inch specifications so that fitting would be no problem.

But when the workman attempted to put the box in place, he found a single bolt protruding one full inch into the front center of the niche. The old man quickly procured a wrench and pliers and removed the obstacle. While this was in progress, one of the bystanders who had just been through four days of high symbolism and formal liturgy, noted that he could almost hear a cosmic chuckle.

Joe had his wink.

Then it was done.

THE TIME JOE MATHEWS DIED

We in the Order knew it was coming. The cancer that was discovered two months ago had ravaged Joe's sturdy frame leaving it jaundiced, haggard and weakened. His eyes had seen through; they had always been Joe's strongest dramatic feature, and now they displayed the terror and fascination of death itself. Despite our reluctance to face up to reality and all our hoping and wishing that it were not so, we knew it was coming.

He knew it was coming. Indeed, looking back on the past year, one can almost believe that the illness, the emergency operation, the devastating discovery, the brief respite and the rapid decline were all foreseen and well prepared for. He wasn't interested, he had said when the shortness of his remaining time was communicated, in prolonging his life for the sake of more time. The only thing that concerned him was expanding his arena of effective potential. So he came home from the hospital, knowing as he walked through the Institute offices, that it would be his last time.

He was prepared for death. In fact virtually every talk he had ever made referred to death and the necessity to face that inevitable fact as a precondition to living a profound life. But, he said, he had not been ready for the pain, suffering and loneliness that accompanies dying. He had been reflective lately, and quiet. Those who knew him assumed that, as was his custom, he was living his own living and reflecting on that, and that he would say nothing about it until some conclusion was reached.

We were ready as a community could be for the certainty that was immanent. Joe was attended around the clock by Lyn and a couple of close colleagues. The rest of us kept a respectful distance. As the time drew obviously near, a small group drew aside to make detailed plans. There were arrangements to be made, a service to be prepared, housing to be readied, food to be cooked, transportation to be handled, decor to be put into place; the announcement event was designed and a schedule worked through which would, without slowing down the mission, provide a way for everyone to be engaged in creating a funeral celebration fit for the times and the man. Joe himself had dictated the values: wholly within the historic Church; victorious, not tragic; objectively liturgical; honoring God, not man. Cremation was his wish with a desire to be placed in the niche nearest his son. The mausoleum was contacted and the space secured. His brother was reached aboard ship in the Mediterranean and returned home immediately. Everything was prepared.

As the medical prognosis shortened from a matter of days to a matter of hours, more visitors were invited to come by to see Joe. He had hoped for one last meeting with the Order's leadership, but that was not to be. So we visited as individuals and couples--half expecting to "say goodbye" or to "be comforting," and finding ourselves ever so gently called to account once more. "What's happening?" "How's it going?" "How did you do that?" "What're you going to do next?"

The plans were all in place. But now on Friday a weekend program began involving 250 business and professional people from all over the country who, for six months, had been planning this consultation on major issues facing the task. It was too late to cancel this event, even if that were desirable; besides, death might delay its coming. So a "Plan B" was developed to handle all things with decorum even if Joe died in the midst of the weekend.

Sunday morning early, the doctor concluded that a few hours remained. By mid-morning, representatives of the Order, the Church, the family and the Movement gathered to conduct a final prayer service with a conscious but inaudible Joe. Protestants do not have a rite of Extreme Unction as an established sacrament; but this service, adapted from the Anglican tradition, pronounced by prayer and anointment the Word of God in this occasion: You are about to die, and that, too, is of God.

We filed out.

Those who remained sang--songs from the Church, love songs, songs from local communities and spirituals. Then the doctor nodded and the bishop intoned, "In the year of our Lord 1977 on the 16th day of October at high noon, Joseph Wesley Mathews died. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost."

The word trickled out slowly at first and then in quiet torrents. Only for a moment was it considered to make the announcement publicly at once. The Guardians Meeting had only a closing luncheon to bring it to completion, and many of those present knew nothing of Joe or of his significance to the Order. The decision to make the announcement at the end of the feast was quickly adopted.

The closing speaker, having finished his remarks on "The Life of Destiny", read a brief statement, and the entire body moved to the worship hall, there to mark a profound moment before the One who gives everyman his life and who takes his life away. The Scriptures and prayers and witness, chosen well in advance, were classic statements of the Word. The meeting of the Order in residence which followed was a time of quiet reflection on what had happened and of receiving assignments to the practical tasks preparing for the funeral.

Meanwhile the family sent word that those who wished were invited to come pay their last respects to Joe. We walked, that time, up the four flights to the Mathews apartment. Families went together, standing silently in the line that was slowly moving towards the room. Joe was there, awesome in his death. The colors and scars and wrinkles, earned by living and dying a profound life, were unmasked. Lying there dead, he once again exercised the vocation he had named for himself: disclosing the Other World in the midst of this world. He bore silent witness to God--not the God of wish-dreams or romantic ideals, but the God of reality. WE went away moved deeply--not by grief or fear, but by the strange gratitude of having been privileged to set foot on ground recently made sacred by the presence of Mystery.

In due time the undertakers arrived--two young men with a stretcher--rather obviously accustomed to far less order than exhibited here. The forms were signed with the matter-of-fact practicality that in other circumstances serves as a healing diversion from the awful reality of death. But reality itself was here the healer. Two sons and two Order members placed Joe on the stretcher and made their way past colleagues standing in silence to the hearse.

Simultaneously the phoning began. All 103 of the Order's locations in 23 countries were to be notified. And there were special friends, extended family, dignitaries and colleagues who would choose in some way to participate in the event. Likewise preparations began for the influx of people anticipated for the funeral. Practical

work, when done in a thoughtful plan and not as the busyness that evades reality, is a healthy response. We worked and were cared for. But work alone will not suffice. We began a Vigil (the Church was wise in naming its rites "liturgy"--"work") in which everyone took shifts. This continued around the clock from the time of death until the time of interment. Standing for an hour in the Prayer Chapel two by two, people silently or vocally rehearsed the realities of life and death in the Word. We worshipped and were cared for.

Monday the inevitable trip to the funeral home was necessary. A box was required to transport the body to the place of cremation, and we who were familiar with current funeral practices wondered how best to honor Joe's passionate identification with the poor and his equally passionate desire for simplicity in such matters. A plain pine coffin was not available, we were told; only the county morgue used them, and private funeral homes had no access to them. Fortunately however, the director was understanding and made no attempt to sell us on the polished mahogany or bronze and steel pieces that lined his showroom. We settled on what the trade calls a "shipping box," a plain wooden casket covered with gray felt (feebly attempting to disguise the temporality of its construction and its contents) used to transport bodies from one city to another.

At the crematory Joe's cross was removed and, in the presence of an attendant, two funeral directors, one son and two Order representatives, ^{his} Joe's body was committed to the ages in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost

The mausoleum had a niche reserved for the interment. Having once endured the indignity of delivering remains after the funeral of a son to the office for later placement, the family determined that a more appropriate symbolism was required on this occasion. Once again the director was cooperative and arrangements were made to hold a brief service before the niche and then for the ashes to be immediately sealed in place. The stonecutter engraved a simple Congolese Cross--symbol of the Order: Ecumenical--to mark the spot. In preparation for the funeral itself a plain pine box was constructed--10½ inches cube--to contain the urn. On its hinged top was a simple brass plate bearing Joe's name and dates.

Two days later the "cremains" were ready. We arrived with the box and received them over the counter at a nondescript office that might, save for the headstone samples on display, have served as a used car sales place. Somewhat unceremoniously we tore open the masking tape sealing the cardboard package and removed the small metal urn placing it gently in its pine container. On arrival at the Institute a procession silently moved the box to the prayer chapel where, along with the Vigil, four persons stood Watch. It was high noon on Wednesday, and those gathered marked this moment with the service of Sext from the Canonical Hours of the Church.

On Wednesday night the Liturgy task force made its report on the plans for the coming day. It was to hold three main divisions--Preparation, Dramatization and Affirmation. Their work sought to bring ritual consciousness to the deeply human events surrounding a funeral. In the Act of Preparation, representatives of the Order stood watch over the casket. The group, gathering at breakfast, rehearsed detachment from temporal goods and relations through the exercise of a fast. In the Act of Dramatization, one hour before the service, the pine box was carried in silent procession to the worship hall and met there by liturgists who received it as the Church with a brief service of Scripture and prayers. The sound of that service echoing through the hallways gave those standing in line the sense of the eternal as the Church that transcends time again spoke its Words of witness to God.

At the appointed time, the great drama began. We confessed together our failure to take confidence and comfort in life's ultimate mystery and received once again the healing Word that Being was yet faithful even to us. We then rehearsed our corporate gratitude for participation in life itself. Then came the Act of Dedication--in this case, dedication of a completed life to the One who had guarded it in living and dying. So we spoke his life and rendered it to the Mystery. The witness, the Obituary and the Eulogy each held up a dimension of Joe's life, celebrated it as it had been and offered it to God. The community responded in prayers of consolation, resignation and grace. Then the symbols of Joe's temporal covenants were brought forward and placed inside the box--the wedding ring representing his many years of marriage, the Order ring representing his covenant with the religious, the blue shirt symbolizing membership in the global movement of Those Who Care, and finally the cross representing Joe's unflagging commitment to the historical Christian Church. His relations were now completed and forever secure in history. And we who had participated in them were now free to move into the future. There was one task left--to dramatize the placing of Joe in the good earth. For this act, the box was brought to the high altar and members of the family, the Church and the Order each took a handful of dirt -- from Fifth City where Joe had worked and sweated and struggled to build a model for local community renewal -- and heaped it on the box in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. We filed out with the singing of "For All the Saints" to a new life.

The third part of the day paralleled the first. In affirming the fact we had so recently celebrated, we feasted. A plentiful buffet was set, and it became a time of re-engagement. Conversation turned easily to the mission, the accomplishments of the past and dreams of the future. This event flowed easily into songs and dancing the victory we had experienced. In this act, those gathered symbolized the plentitude of life, acknowledged the responsible completion of their responsibility for this event and moved back again to re-engage in the task of Those Who Care.

We had planned for the interment to occur immediately. But a number of colleagues en route from India were being held up by flight delays until late evening. We decided to wait for their arrival and quietly re-posted the Watch one more night. The next morning several carloads of people journeyed to the mausoleum and in the out-of-doors amidst a brisk Fall breeze, intoned once more the words of faith on the occasion of death. As people filed away, the family suggested that the Fifth City dirt, now resting on top of the box with the sign of the cross someone had drawn on it, should be included with the other symbols of Joe's covenants. So it was dumped in.

The whole event was carried off with the utmost decorum and solemnity without falling into coldness that negated human feelings.

Joe once said that the reward for a life of authenticity in the struggle with Being was, at the time a death when Being is finally the victor, a wink--wort of a cosmic recognition of friendship between God and the self.

After the service a few of us stayed behind to witness the placing of the ashes into their niche. An elderly overalled workman rolled his adjustable platform ladder into place and carried the box up to place it inside the 11-inch space. The box had been carefully constructed to 10½-inch specifications so that fitting would be no problem.

But when the workman attempted to put the box in place, he found a single bolt protruding one full inch into the front center of the niche. The old man quickly procured a wrench and pliers and removed the obstacle. While this was in progress, one of the bystanders who had just been through four days of high symbolism and formal liturgy, noted that he could almost hear a cosmic chuckle.

Joe had his wink.

Then it was done.