



HEARING THE QUIET HYMN OF SACRIFICE, DUTY AND LOVE

As a priest, you get used to a lot of sounds. Some are a part of the daily routine — like kneelers lowering to the floor, bells ringing during the consecration and footsteps in the back of the church.

Other sounds can catch one off guard, like the sudden shriek of a baby, an unexpected sneeze or a hymnal that slipped from someone's grip and hit the floor with a thud.

Early in my priesthood, sudden sounds would startle me. Over time, I learned the difference between the normal ones expected in daily life and those that foretell trouble — like the difference between the sound of a table being knocked over in the back of the church and a person falling down.

I suspect priests are not alone in this regard, in learning to listen intuitively and balancing the ear's attentive rest with a prayerful heart. I suspect my mother, and others like her, learned to listen intuitively when raising rambunctious kids. Moms know the difference between the sound of good chaos and bad, and the punctuated silence of peace and that of catastrophe.

Not all sounds are loud. Sometimes the most important ones are the quiet ones — like the faint whistle of an open winter window or that of a maladjusted hearing aid's whimsical and distracting song.

Sounds speak, sometimes in a whisper. However, not all

whispers are the same. In fact, some whispers pierce the heart.

I remember the moment my heart was pierced, when sorrow's long arrow lodged deep into my innermost soul and the words of faith were drowned out by the bitter cruelties of life.

I stood silently on the steps of St. Theresa's Church in Rye, in front of the flag-draped casket of Capt. Jack Casey — a 26-year-old Marine killed in a helicopter crash in the prime of his life.

When the funeral Mass ended, hundreds of family members and friends gathered on the front lawn of the church to bid their final farewell.

Our nation paid her final respects in the only way she could. Amidst the hushed, quiet tears of his young widow and those who loved him, the honor guard offered their salute, their guns cutting through the heavy air.

With each shot, I flinched — not because they were unexpected but because their sound cruelly spoke to a finality of earthly life, a finality of which we are all painfully aware.

The honor guards' salute was followed by the bugler's Taps. Then, in the distance, the quiet rumble of four CH-53K King Stallion helicopters began to fill the sky.

Their distant rumble quickly

became a roar. The trees bowed in their presence, and even the ground itself shook.

As the line of helicopters and Marines made their salute, I did not know whether to smile or cry. In the end, I did both.

I smiled because, in that moment, I was so very proud to be an American and proud of the country we call home. I smiled because the Marines were on the move, and they were making sure one of their own was not left behind — that his memory would be forever carried forward in our hearts.

I cried because the very choppers that honored him were similar to the one in which he lost his life. I cried because, like everyone there that day, I could feel the weight of the loss.

The silence that fell in the wake of the choppers' roar pierced my soul, the whisper that broke death's silence.

As the crowd stood in numbed silence, motionless in the wake of all that just occurred, the bitterly cold wind blew.

All that could be heard was the clanking of Capt. Casey's metal dog tags, which were tied to the casket handle's hinge. The more the wind blew, the more they twisted and played their tune — the quiet hymn of sacrifice, duty and love.

I am not sure whether others heard Capt. Casey's dog tags too, or saw them glittering against the cold February sun. But on that day, as I stood on the front steps of the church, I did. I was reminded, "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for the life of a friend."

Whether that love is the love of a brave Marine for his country, or a loving God for his people on the cross, it is beautiful and it is real.

Faith does not make the weight of the cross less. It makes the promise of the Resurrection real.

God leaves no one behind. It is this reality that gives us hope, even in the most difficult of times. He gently whispers this truth to us each day. The hard part is hearing it through life's roar. ■



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