

Funeral of Victoria Lala Leach

November 5, 2007

Cathedral Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem

Sermon, Bishop Paul V. Marshall

The previous speakers have quite rightly used up the good stories, so let me just reflect a bit with you.

I don't believe I have ever been at an event characterized by such finely balanced proportions of grief and gratitude. Walking out of the hospital last Thursday night I found myself saying to one of her neighbors that just knowing Lala was a gift, but I felt profoundly sad in saying it.

Every one of us grieves Lala's loss because, as the previous speakers just said so well, she was a person who used much her life to do many kinds of good, the kind of good where you get your hands dirty, and did it with the humility and genuine kindness that only truly beautiful souls can muster. In fact, in almost 12 years, the only time I ever heard her come close to raising her voice was last June when I said "Chil-E-an," and even then, all she did was pointedly pronounce CHILLean correctly—I had, after all, had had one previous warning.

It is interesting to me that one way people manage grief at the loss of someone important to them is to take some aspect of that person's character or mannerisms into themselves. Sometimes that is as simple as wearing their cufflinks or taking over a role in the family. But this process usually is more subtle and sometimes involves personality changes. Grief specialists aren't particularly happy when this occurs, because often what is adopted from the departed person's repertoire is eccentric or worse.

I would suggest that on this one occasion that we who love and miss Lala might do very well to take on one or two of her characteristics consciously and let them become memorials to Lala as they live in us.

I have time to consider just a few events in her life that indicate ways that our own lives can be strengthened. Lala once told me of her coming to Bethlehem in the 1950s as a busy and somewhat distracted young mother and corporate wife, and having her life change because a priest from the church where we sit today simply and quietly invited her to consider whether it was time for her to try church again. If you know her at all, you know the rest of that story and how important it was to her. She didn't just go to church; she worked on her spiritual development in a disciplined way with results we celebrate today. You can be holy without being fake – Lala is proof of that. Additionally, she became, in many ways, a person who helped others reconnect with their spiritual center.

There are today many people who because of cultural shifts or personal issues find themselves as spiritually disconnected as Lala did on that day half a century ago. Perhaps some folks here, like she did, need to hear the gentle suggestion that it may be time for them to try to find a spiritual center again. More likely, since you are in fact here, you may know someone who might profit from that delicate invitation that Lala so often made in just such gentle terms.

When I think of the kinds of things Lala did for others, and I focus the countless hours of Spanish translation in the hospital in particular, not to mention years of wrangling all that jewelry for charity sales, I am struck by two things. The first is, as I said, that there is a peculiarly pure and transforming aspect to doing for others in a way that involves physical effort. There is an even more life-changing quality to helping others by being there for them one-on-one. The central truth of Lala's religion was that God became incarnate -- in Jesus he got close to humanity, and people changed. When we choose to get closer to those who are in need, we and they are changed together. A way to keep a piece of Lala in our hearts is go help somebody in person on a regular basis.

At the baptism of a great grandchild, I for some reason administered Holy Communion to Lala in Spanish. This led to a long conversation about worship resources in Spanish, and I was able to get her the new Spanish hymnal. She was delighted at first but called me back in a few days to wonder if I could tell her where to find a Spanish version of the hymn read to us before, "Fight the Good Fight." That led us on a merry chase through modern Spanish hymnals, but it also produced the story in that special, beautifully modest voice of hers that I will always hear in my mind, of how that hymn had been her song and prayer, as many of you know, during a battle for her life. There is now a mountain of data about how the body, mind, and spirit work together -- but before that mountain existed, there was Mrs. Leach conquering the assault on her body by disciplining her spirit.

At sometime *when I am not up here speaking*, you might take a look at that text in the hymnal (no. 552). It's a useful text for our time. We are aware of the parts of us that feel a little bit entitled, a little bit picked on when things become difficult. Lala had a different attitude: her battle hymn suggests that when Life gets difficult, well, then you're playing in the Super Bowl -- it's tough, but the stakes are very high and nobody complains about being picked for the Super Bowl. Instead, they make their best effort. Relying on God's strength, that's exactly what she did.

So from a preacher's point of view, it might be a very good idea to grieve Lala's loss by taking aspects of her personality into ours. It would be a way we could give lasting thanks for this precious saint of God, Victoria Lala Leach, and another step on our own journey to life in abundance.