

Homily for the funeral of Mary Ellen Kulda / Sajnos, nincs magyar fordítás!

(Jn5:24-29) A good share of a woman's biological makeup is annexed from the domain of self and dedicated to the other, to the child. Women nurse their children for umpteen months after undergoing the pain and anguish of childbirth. Before that, women gain 30 pounds on average during pregnancy. They carry their child in the womb for nine months during which time they eat, drink and breathe in his place. And let's not forget the years of changing dirty diapers! When women aren't with child, nature still imposes a regular ordeal upon them. Even this is ultimately for the sake of another – for the sake of humanity. Life seems to have dealt women a bad hand until we consider the flip side of this coin. There are, for example, ten men in prison for every woman. There are 70 men on death row for every woman. Given these facts, imagining that there are twice as many men in hell as women doesn't seem too outlandish. We've just considered the question of morality; now let's consider spirituality! This is how one priest summed up the difference in spiritual awareness between men and women: "No matter how good or bad it is," he said, "whenever I deliver a sermon you can be sure of two things: at least one man in the congregation will be nodding off meanwhile at least one woman will be tearing up."

Do you think all these statistics are unrelated to a woman's biological makeup? – Think again! We men often amaze women by how self-centered we can be. What women often fail to realize is that altruism is hard-wired into their physical makeup. Therefore, it comes much more naturally to them. What is true of women in general is particularly true of someone like Mary Ellen Kulda. She was the mother of eight children. Her maternity was a four-fold actualization of the selflessness that belongs in general to womankind. The only vocation that is more selfless – and more rewarding – belongs to the woman who embraces perpetual virginity for love of Jesus.

I lost track of Mary Ellen well before her 14-year battle with Alzheimer's began, during which time her family stood by her so faithfully. Instead, I knew Mary Ellen thirty years ago in the early eighties following her conversion to the Catholic faith. To this day, I can't forget the guilt that plagued her back then. She would accuse herself of stubbornness of heart. In her mind, she had resisted her conversion all too long. Realizing just how important the formative years are, she felt like she wasn't there for her older children as a witness of faith back when they needed her most.

I was just a seminarian in those days, but I knew enough to tell her that faith is one gift that none of us can earn. God must grant it. Had I known then what I now know today, I would have consoled her with the following thought: Mary Ellen hadn't been spinning her wheels all those years before her conversion. Throughout her married life, she had traveled the path that leads to conversion, namely: the selflessness of being a dedicated wife and mother of many. She hadn't been losing time. Her mind may have resisted her conversion but her heart was leading the way. Not that Mary Ellen would ever have credited herself with her own conversion – instead, she gave that prized distinction to her devoted husband, Richard of happy memory. His crucial role in her conversion was the highlight of her marriage, "the best thing about marrying Dad," as she later confided to her children. Mary Ellen's heartfelt anxiety proves one thing: if our Catholic faith meant little to her before her conversion, afterwards it meant absolutely everything. Given this fact, it is most appropriate that during her funeral mass we examine more carefully the faith that meant more to her than life itself.

Faith, like other virtues, is simply a good habit. Like all virtues, faith lies in the middle between two contrary vices – one vice being a deficiency, the other an excess. Consider the virtue of hope for a moment! Hope lies between the opposite extremes of despair and presumption. Despair has too little of hope's active ingredient, presumption has too much of it. If a student despairs of passing his test, he won't study because it seems useless. If he is presumptuous, on the other hand, then he won't study either because it seems like overkill. Although opposite extremes, these two vices have more in common with one another than either one of them has with hope in the middle – they both prevent the student from studying. Hope alone inspires him to crack the books. The virtue of courage also lies between two opposite extremes. Cowardice has too little of courage's active ingredient while foolhardiness has too much of it. Cowardice is afraid of everything while foolhardiness is afraid of nothing. The courageous man, however, is afraid of some things but not everything. Only courage wins the war. The coward retreats when he should fight while the foolhardy man fights when he should retreat.

Like other virtues, faith also lies in between two contrary extremes: credulity and incredulity. Credulity, or gullibility, has too much of faith's active ingredient while incredulity, or rationalism, has too little of it. Credulity believes absolutely everything; incredulity believes absolutely nothing. Authentic faith, on the other hand, believes some things but not everything. Although opposite extremes, credulity and incredulity are very similar:

they both spell the end of authentic religion. Credulity believes every religion, incredulity believes none. Faith alone believes the one true religion to the exclusion of all others.

Credulity is completely subjective: all that matters is what I, the subject, decide to believe. My choice is everything. Incredulity is completely objective: I have no choice. Objective evidence compels me to acknowledge a truth that is outside of me. Once I see this microphone/podium, I have no choice. Sure, I might say it isn't here, but internally I can no longer believe anything but what my eyes tell me. My brothers and sisters in Christ! If credulity depends on an absolute whim and incredulity depends on absolute proof, what then does faith in the middle depend on? – Nothing more or less than a sign – which is less than proof yet much more than a whim.

Scientists are only persuaded by absolute proof; so many people today feel that logic is on the side of incredulity or rationalism. According to them, we shouldn't believe anything without absolute proof. However reasonable this may sound in theory, in practice it is a fatal error. Let me explain! Faith is believing something as certain even though I didn't see it for myself. Why do I believe? – Because I am convinced by the testimony of a witness – someone who did see it. When that witness is a human being, then we are talking about human faith. When that witness is God – speaking through His prophets in the Old Testament or His Church in the New – then we are talking about divine faith.

A case in point: Despite the lack of any proof, none of you had the slightest doubt, until now, that I am a priest; but now, some of you may have started to wonder. Wherever I go, I minister to people who weren't at my ordination, who may not have ever laid eyes on me before. I simply present myself as a priest and others accept me as such – no questions asked. This is human faith. Do you see how second nature human faith is to us? Human life is impossible to live without it. Without proof, we routinely believe that the pilot can fly the plane, the surgeon can operate and the cook won't poison us. We habitually act on information for which we have no proof. If we needed proof before acting on any piece of information, then our life would be completely frustrated. We might as well not get out of bed in the morning! Logic, therefore, is on the side of faith. Human faith corroborates the most trivial aspects of life but it isn't limited to these. After all, we only know who our parents are through human faith!

If human life is impossible to live without human faith, then we shouldn't fault God for making the divine life of heaven impossible to attain without divine faith. He's only expecting as much trust from us as we routinely give to one another. So let's not perform an autopsy on the articles of our Catholic faith when we seldom bother to take the temperature of human assertions! Let's be consistent! That's all God expects of us. Humanity's fall from grace began back in paradise when Eve believed the devil's lies without absolute proof. She believed Satan. You might say that mankind fell through faith, so we must also be saved through faith. We too must believe God without absolute proof. We must be consistent! For the measure with which we measure will be measured back to us. (Mt7:2b) In the Our Father we pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." (Mt6:12) Here again, God is only expecting us to be consistent.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ! I care for an elderly flock at St. Stephen of Hungary Catholic Church in Los Angeles. For this reason, I am well acquainted with the concerns of older Catholics. As they draw near to the end of this earthly pilgrimage, aches and pains can grow into intense sufferings. But they would rather die a dozen deaths than see the younger generations – whether within their families in particular or the world at large – growing up today without the faith. So I resolve to give a few reasons at their funeral masses for the faith that they hold so dear. That is my purpose now. We have already said that faith is based on signs which are less than a proof but much more than a whim. There are umpteen signs that we could consider. Here, however, we only have time to consider one of them – the greatest sign Jesus worked: His own resurrection from the dead. In today's gospel, our Lord solemnly assured us with a double 'amen' that the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God summoning them to rise from the grave. One day our beloved Mary Ellen will hear Jesus' voice summoning her back to life in her glorified body. We needn't simply take Jesus at His word in today's gospel. He has validated His word with one mighty deed: He Himself has risen from the grave.

A bodily resurrection may seem incredible but the alternative is even more so. Did the apostles say to themselves, "While Jesus was alive, we couldn't convert one single nation, but now that He is dead, we can convert the entire world?" They didn't, however, simply preach the gospel throughout the known world, with one exception they also died for it. Instead of wealth or worldly advantage, their tireless labors only earned them a dungeon and a death sentence. Finding even one person who will die for the truth is difficult. Are nearly a dozen men all going to die for a lie? That's what the apostles did if they never really saw the risen Lord. I find it

easier to believe in Jesus' resurrection than to believe that the apostles died cruel deaths for the sake of a lie. Jesus' humiliation and defeat at the crucifixion were absolute. How do we explain the stunning worldwide success of Christianity today without the intervention of some astounding victory like the resurrection? Dear friends in Christ! There are countless other signs that validate our faith, but the empty tomb is reason enough to believe in the faith that Mary Ellen freely embraced and steadfastly practiced. Mary Ellen was a model Catholic but she would be the last one to canonize herself. I know she would want me to end with an appeal for prayers on her behalf. After her many labors and patient endurance through her long debilitating illness, may she rest in peace together with her beloved Richard until the resurrection of the just! And may perpetual light shine upon them both! Amen!