

Now I had to be not just a priest but a grieving brother



“ Among the hardest things a Catholic priest has to do is to bury a member of his family. While by law or custom most professions are discouraged from looking after their own family, a priest is often expected to minister to his. And on the whole we want to. Baptisms and weddings are joys. Funerals, however, are tough gigs.

I have just buried my 56-year-old sister, Tracey. I have done many tragic funerals – the deaths of children, of suicides, of the victims of car accidents and murders among them – but Tracey’s Requiem Mass was the most demanding of any liturgy at which I have presided. I have acted as the family’s priest on other occasions, empathetically pastoral I hope; but now I had to be not just a priest but a grieving brother, alive to all the history that had brought us to this day, and alert to all the tensions it held.

Tracey’s life and death were more complex than most. After graduating as a nurse in 1981, she immediately left Australia to work with Mother Teresa in the House of the Dying at Calcutta. All up she spent three years in India over two stints, and she loved it. On her return home she ran the health centre at Wadeye, a remote aboriginal community in the Northern Territory. Bush nursing and Tracey Leonard were synonyms.

It was there, aged 28, on 23 October 1988, while doing a favour for some of her friends, that her car broke down. As it was being towed away, her vehicle rolled off the road and hit a tree. Everyone else got out without a scratch. Tracey was left a quadriplegic. She had been all over the world caring for God’s poor; in the 28 years since her tragic accident, Tracey has been the poorest person I know: a kind of poverty that had very little to do with lack of money.

Ten years after the accident, using a voice recognition programme, Tracey told the story of her extraordinary experiences in Calcutta and outback Australia. Her book was called *The Full Catastrophe*. Since her death, I have lost count of the number of people who had never met her, but who have told me they felt they knew her from that book. They found her courage inspiring. I did too.

Whether in or out of a wheelchair, Tracey was passionate about comforting the sick, campaigning for justice – especially for the dignity and rights of indigenous Australians – and defending

the innocent. The people who lived out these struggles were her saints – and Tracey was a saint to me. Saints aren’t perfect, but they’re transparently good. Trace was far from perfect, though I am yet to meet anyone who was dealt such a devastatingly cruel hand, and to remain as positive, engaged and encouraging. The evening before she died, after recognising each of the friends and family who had gathered around her hospital bed, as it seemed her awareness was slipping, she began to call out: “Feed the boat people! Feed the boat people!” While everyone in the room was focused on Tracey’s needs, she was focused on those she thought were in greater need.

In the years after her accident, her death would sometimes be a topic of conversation between us. She gave out lines like: “Life has not exactly been all beer and skittles” and “You know, Richard, there are worse things than dying”. While she found some peace and reconciliation with her life, I would not have wanted her to suffer a day longer.

She gave me more than a few instructions for her funeral. Everyone should leave some guidelines as to what they would like. Tracey’s went from “Just cremate me quickly like the Hindus do in India” to “I want 20 people in the backyard – and you can say some prayers if you like”. Most recently, she pleaded, “I don’t care what you do, Richard – just don’t go over the top.”

I am not sure a Requiem Mass with a bishop and 18 priests on the altar qualifies as low key, but we did our best to keep it simple. We had the private cremation of her body that she had asked for and the long and wonderful wake we knew she wanted.

I lost the plot twice during Mass. The first time was when my brother thanked our almost 84-year-old mother for devotedly caring for our sister over nearly three decades. And I came off the rails again at the very end of my homily. I had decided to adapt the most famous of lines from one of Tracey’s saints, Martin Luther King. I imagined him helping her out of that wheelchair and declaring: “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, she’s free at last!”

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