Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



My grandmother's family home in County Kilkenny, Ireland (Margaret Cessna)



by Sr. Margaret Cessna

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Grace is my favorite word. Amazing. How sweet the sound. I can almost taste it.

There may be several definitions. Not needed. You will know it immediately when you come face to face with it.

My grandma was almost full of grace. But somewhere inside of her was a pocket of sadness that she carried with her all of her days.

She had a loving family in her small hometown in County Kilkenny. But that sadness started when she was taken out of school in the second grade to work at the home of a British military family. The pocket of sadness continued to grow until, at 18, she left her homeland to find work in England, where she found love and peace at last. She never went back to Ireland. Never wanted to.

But every so often, once settled in the United States, she would wonder out loud questions about her family. "I wonder whatever happened to my brother Bill." She never forgot their faces or the sound of their voices.

Ireland did that to her. Not the Irish people but the British "occupation."



My Irish grandma. Humanity at its best. (Courtesy of Margaret Cessna)

Several years ago, when I visited her little village of Castlecomer, my cousin Dennis, who still lives there, drove me around. He stopped the car at the school, still standing, where Grandma studied for two years. Not long enough to learn to read or write. She eventually taught herself to read but for all of her life she could only sign her name.

Down the road, Dennis stopped again to point out the estate where she worked for 10 years. He didn't know what her job was. Really, who can imagine the work that an 8-year-old little girl did in the home of a British military family? She worked there until she was 18. The reality took my breath away and I wept.

As she grew into adulthood, grace in her grew, too. She left England with her husband and her children: My mother was 5 and my two uncles were 7 and 9. They landed in New York Harbor in 1920. My mother remembered the ship (the Aquitania) and the trip across the ocean. She always boldly claimed, "We did not come in steerage. We paid full price!"

Having experienced harshness in her youth, Grandma was determined to leave it behind when they set sail. She yearned only to be close to her family. As the family grew, her grandchildren became her new world. We were her richness, her fortune. And we worshipped at her knee.

She taught us the value of being loving and kind and generous. I have beautiful memories of a warm hug, eyes that twinkle, a great Sunday dinner, a dollar slipped into my pocket. The memory of being loved beyond measure. She hugged us when we won and held us when we cried. Because she knew both. She made us feel that we were God's greatest creation. And a gift to her. Not much else mattered.

I very rarely saw the sadness but it was always there. What I knew and loved was her grace. She never lost her sadness but grace prevailed.

Suffering surrounded by grace. Perhaps the human condition. No escape from that. But the beauty of it all is when grace reigns.

My Irish grandma. Humanity at its best. I miss her. But I will never forget her.

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We are all infused with grace. Grace that we share. Grace that blesses others. Grace that gets us through. But there is no denying that the darkness of loss, or regret, or loneliness, or grief find a place in each of us, too. We do have choices.

What to do with opposing forces can be a challenge. The urge might be to push the sadness aside, to tamp it down, ignore it as the rhythm of life. But that erases the opportunity to understand others.

What if the urge is to push the grace aside and allow the darkness to rule our daily life with bitterness and anger and isolation by carrying a world of pain inside?

Or what if grace and darkness become partners? What if sadness becomes teacher with the help of grace that leads to wholeness?

Grace fuels us. Empathy opens our hearts.

What if embracing all of our human experience allows us also to embrace others with compassion, with love, with grace?

What if grace gives meaning to tears and leads to the opening of the heart to others? To understanding. To generosity. To tenderness.

Óscar Romero is quoted as saying, "There are many things that can only be seen through eyes that have cried."

Tears that allow for an open heart to understand and feel and share the pain of others. That leads to being nearly full of grace.

Darkness may endure, but — if the song is correct — grace will lead us home.

And home is worth the journey.