

**HOMILY FOR THE FUNERAL OF  
VERONICA MARY PAPROCKI**

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki  
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

**Saint Constance Church, Chicago  
March 19, 2019**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Eucharist is a time to give thanks, so on behalf of my siblings and other family members, I thank all of you not only for being here today for this Mass of Christian Burial for our mother, Veronica Mary Paprocki, but I thank you also for your love and friendship over the years and especially for your prayers and support for our mother in her final illness. I am grateful to Father Richard Milek and the staff of Saint Constance Parish for their hospitality. When I was Pastor here from 2001 to 2003 – two and a half very happy years, I might add – Mom attended Mass here several times, including my Mass of Thanksgiving when I was named Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago in 2003 and when I celebrated my 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ordination as a priest just a couple of months later, so Mom was well-known in this community and I am glad to see so many familiar faces.

It is a tremendous tribute to my mother to have the presence of the Archbishop of Chicago, His Eminence, Blase Cardinal Cupich, who will give the final commendation at the end of this Mass, and to have so many fellow bishops and my brother priests of Archdiocese of Chicago and the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois present to concelebrate this funeral Mass. Thank you also to the Consul General of Poland, the Honorable Piotr Janicki, for your presence here today. Bóg zapłać!

My family and I are very grateful to the Sisters of the Congregation of the Resurrection, who taught my aunts, Marian and Genevieve, at Resurrection High School, as well as my siblings and me at St. Casimir Grade School, and my sisters at St. Casimir High School, located at what is now Our Lady of Tepeyac Parish. So it was very natural for Mom to have moved into Resurrection Retirement Community and then to Resurrection Life Center in her final years. Thank you for taking such good care of Mom and our family physically and spiritually over these many years. It is very fitting that Mom was cared for by the Sisters of the Resurrection, died at Resurrection Life Center, and will be laid to rest at Resurrection Cemetery. Indeed, our firm faith and profound hope in the resurrection of the dead is the very reason for our gathering here today.

I want to extend a special thank you to my sister Ramona for looking after Mom almost daily since Mom moved to Resurrection Retirement Community and then to Resurrection Life Center. Thanks to my brother Ed for going to Res on Sunday mornings to make sure Mom got to the chapel and then sitting with her during Mass. Thanks to Johnny for making sure all of Mom's bingo cards were covered. By the way, Mom won the very last bingo game she ever played just a few Sundays ago! I am also very grateful to all my siblings for your increased attention to Mom in the last couple of weeks. Even without saying a word, Mom was able simply by her presence to bring us all closer together again.

It should come as no surprise to you that Mom was a big fan of the Chicago Blackhawk Hockey Team. There is no way that Mom could have been married to Dad for almost half a century without becoming a fan herself of his favorite team. Once Mom even attended a game walking up to the stairs of the second balcony of the old Chicago Stadium while she was pregnant! So it was natural that her children would be born with the Indian head virtually engraved on our chests! Mom was so much a part of the Blackhawk family that the Blackhawks' television play-by-play announcer Pat Foley gave Mom a shout-out and expressed condolences during his

television broadcast of last Saturday's game in Montreal. Troy Murray in his radio broadcast with John Wiedeman also gave a shout-out with condolences from Vancouver during last night's game. I was deeply touched that Betty Wirtz, matriarch of the Wirtz Family that owns the Blackhawks, sent roses when she heard that Mom was dying and also sent flowers to the funeral home last night. Aunt Betty, as she is affectionately known in Springfield, where she lives and attends Mass at our Cathedral, sets a high standard of class that permeates the Blackhawks organization. The Blackhawks Alumni Association and the team also sent flowers. Several members of the Blackhawks' senior management and former players also came to the wake last night. Thank you so much!

I see that Patrick McCaskey of the Chicago Bears family is here too. Mom was a Bears fan also! Thank you for being here, Pat.

Most of all, in this Eucharist, we give thanks to almighty God for the great blessing that He shared with us for 91½ years in the person known as Veronica Mary Paprocki. In a sense Mom's whole life was a homily, giving us lessons in the faith, and since she lived just a few years short of a century, pleased be advised that this will not be a short homily. At this point I'm sure the St. Constance School children are thinking, "Yes! Talk as long as you

want, Bishop!" I think it is wonderful that you students are here, because you can learn a great deal from hearing about the life of my mother.

As Mom was dying, I received several email and text messages from people saying that they were praying to Saint Joseph for the grace of a happy death for Mom. Pope Saint John Paul II used to say that there are no coincidences, only God's Providence, so it is providential that Mom's Mass of Christian Burial is taking place today on this Solemnity of Saint Joseph. It is also no small coincidence that today is sixteen years to the day that I was consecrated a bishop along with Bishops Francis Kane and Gustavo Garcia Siller. Bishop Kane is here today, too. Happy anniversary, Bishop Kane! Of course, Mom was present with us that day at Holy Name Cathedral.

A few years ago, for Mother's Day 2015, my brother Joey wrote a reflection entitled, "Veronica: True Icon - A Tribute to My Mom," drawing on the fact that the name Veronica means, "true icon." Since Joey will share some of those reflections on Mom's first name after Communion, I would like to focus on her middle name, or actually on her middle initial, "M."

In my homily at the funeral in 1997 for my father, John H. Paprocki, Jr., I wove my reflections around his enigmatic middle initial - H. I say "enigmatic" because Dad himself admitted that he was never really sure

what the “H” stood for. His birth certificate said Henry, but somehow during his Army years it became Harry. Then again, his baptismal record showed “Hieronymus,” which in Latin starts with an “H”, but in English translates as Jerome, so maybe he was really John J. Paprocki!

Since we were never really sure what his middle initial stood for, I used that “H” in my homily to describe all kinds of things that stood for Dad. I suggested that “H” could stand for hockey, happy, humorous, hilarious, honest, husband, harmonious, hospitable, home, humble, hero, hopeful and holy.

In Mom’s case, we know that her middle name was Mary, but just as with Dad, there are plenty of fitting words that come from her middle initial “M”:

“M” first of all stands for Mary, Mom’s actual middle name, coming of course from the Blessed Virgin Mary, mother of Our Savior Jesus Christ. Mom was born on August 22, 1927, the feast day of the Queenship of Mary. Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary was a big part of Mom’s life. Mom would pray the Rosary every day, at least until it became for difficult for her to do so in recent years. Even while she was living at Res, if the weather

permitted, I would take Mom out to the grotto and we would pray the Rosary together.

I still have childhood memories of Mom's devotion to the Rosary. I remember when I was in fourth grade, my teacher was Sister Dominic, who is still active in ministry in the Pastoral Care Department at Resurrection Hospital. Once in art class, Sister Dominic had us draw a rosary. I drew a rosary with each bead a different color. Sister Dominic questioned that, saying that they don't make rosaries that way. Perhaps every decade would be a different color, she said, but not every bead. I protested that I knew they did because my mother had a rosary with every bead a different color. Well, Sister Dominic was a Doubting Thomas, who said she would not believe me unless I brought in the rosary so she could see it for herself, which of course I did. That was the first time I learned that nuns were not infallible!

When it became apparent that Mom was in the last stages of dying, I was with her and had that special rosary in my hand and held my mother's hand as I repeated the words of the Hail Mary, ". . . pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death." As I got halfway through the third decade of the glorious mysteries, "The Descent of the Holy Spirit," Mom squeezed my hand real tight and breathed her last breath. I looked up at the clock and it

was exactly three in the afternoon, the hour when Our Lord died on the cross. As I have told people of these circumstances of my mother's death, I received an email from Mike Christie, a member of my senior staff. Mike said that he told his boys of my mother's passing last Wednesday and said they needed to pray. Matthew, his almost-10-year-old, asked when she passed away, and Mike told him it was around 3:00 o'clock. Little Matthew said, "Perfect, the hour of Divine Mercy." Out of the mouths of babes . . . "Perfect, the hour of Divine Mercy." I learned later that, at that very same moment, at 9:00 PM in Poland, which is six hours ahead of our time zone, the Archbishop of Częstochowa, Archbishop Wacław Depo, was praying for Mom at the Shrine of Our Lady of Częstochowa. The icon of Our Lady of Częstochowa happens to be one of the images we chose for Mom's prayer cards. There are no coincidences, just God's providence!

People have been praying for Mom around the world. On March 2<sup>nd</sup> my friend Christopher Kerzich ran the Tokyo Marathon, which he dedicated to Mom and ran with Mom's name printed on his shoe! This past Friday, Patrick Castle, founder of the LIFE Runners pro-life running group, and his wife Angie ran the Jerusalem Half Marathon and dedicated it to Mom. So people were even praying for her in the Holy Land!

“M” stands for merciful. Mom could be a strict disciplinarian, like when she would send me to my room for the rest of the evening on Fridays because I refused to eat the fish sticks she had cooked. But she also had a merciful side. Once when my siblings and I were very young and were misbehaving—I know, it’s hard to believe, but it did happen occasionally—and Mom tried to discipline us, we threatened to run away from home. She laughed and said we wouldn’t get very far without food or a place to sleep, but she said if we didn’t want to live with her anymore, we wouldn’t need to run away from home, because she would run away from home instead! We must have said we thought she was bluffing, because she soon packed a small bag and walked out the door. Now before you think this was a terrible case of child neglect, I’m sure she did not go far beyond the front door close enough to the kitchen windows to hear us, because after a momentary stunned silence, we began to cry, at which she promptly came back in the door and said she would stay if we promised to behave, which of course we did!

“M” could also stand for merry — m-e-r-r-y — as in joyful and cheerful. The staff at Resurrection Life Center frequently commented on how happy and cheerful Mom seemed to be, even in her suffering. In her last

days, when she was sleeping a lot and no longer speaking any words, from time to time she would open her eyes and see one of children there, and she would just smile.

“M” stands for married. Veronica Mary Bonat was married to John H. Paprocki, Jr., over seventy years ago, on September 11, 1948. When Dad died in December of 1997, Mom and Dad had been married for forty-nine years! There is no question that Mom and Dad were faithful to each other all those years. Even after Dad passed away, Mom had a few suitors, some older gentlemen who wanted to date Mom, and she always very politely said no. She would only say that she wasn’t interested in being with anyone else, but it was clear that no one could take the place of John, the love of her life. The most remarkable thing about their marriage was that they never fought. Not only was there never any physical violence, but I don’t think any of us can remember even a harsh word between them. Mom and Dad had a great harmony of spirit.

“M” stands for Mother or Mom. In fact, Mom gave birth to nine children. The oldest was a girl, Ramona, and the youngest was a girl, Anne Marie. In between were seven boys: James, Thomas, Edward, John, Ronald, Joseph and Allen. I would say that Mom’s primary identity in life was being

a mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. Before getting married, Mom worked at Marshall Field's downtown. After getting married, her full-time work was taking care of an ever-growing household. Eventually, after we were all grown up, she would work with Dad in the pharmacy, so it really was a Mom & Pop operation.

"M" stands for meals – as in breakfast, lunch and dinner. Mom prepared lots of meals for us. Well, maybe at least lunch and dinner. Mom was not a morning person. Dad was, so it was Dad who usually made breakfast and helped us to get ready for school. On the other hand, it was Mom who would stay up late to help us with our homework. Once, after most of us had grown up and moved out of the house, I came home for dinner. It was just five of us: Allen and Ann, who were still living at home, Mom, Dad and I. Despite this relatively small group by Paprocki family standards, Mom had cooked a huge quantity of food, using the big Army pot that she often cooked in. I asked, "Mom, who's going to eat all this food?" She just quietly said, "Well, you never know who might come by." Sure enough, just a few minutes later, Johnny, Ronny and Joey, who were sharing an apartment nearby at the time, came through the door and asked, "Is there anything to eat?" Mom just smiled and said, "Of course!"

“M” stands for magnanimous. The word ‘magnanimous’ comes from Latin, *magnus*, which means ‘great’ + *animus*, which means ‘soul’. Mom had a ‘great soul,’ that is, a very loving and generous spirit who always treated everyone fairly. My siblings may not be aware of this story because they were not around when it happened, but Mom used to come to my Masses occasionally after Dad died, especially when I became a bishop. On more than one occasion, when Mom would be standing next to me after Mass, I would introduce her to people who came up to greet me, and they would often say, “You must be very proud of your son,” to which Mom would always respond, “I am very proud of all nine of my children!” It was not only a very diplomatic thing to say, but also very magnanimous in bestowing her love equally on all of her children. Well, at least she tried to do so, because we all know that deep down in her heart I always was her favorite! . . . Just kidding! . . . Well, maybe not.

“M” stands for magnificent as well as modest. Just looking at her photos, especially her wedding pictures, you can see how beautiful she was. Mom was not vain, but she always wanted to be presentable. Even when she was in a wheelchair at Res, whenever we were taking her from her room to the dining room or to the chapel, she insisted on stopping at the sink to put

on some lipstick and her earrings, and make sure her hair was brushed. My niece Amy related a dream she had about her grandma just a few nights before she died. In an email, Amy wrote about her grandma, "She was standing and looked like she did in about her 70s. Had a nice perm and her pink lipstick. I said, 'Grandma you look wonderful; how are you feeling?' And she said, 'I'm feeling so much better, thank you so much for being with me.'" I believe that was Mom communicating about already beginning to experience her new life in a better place. Less than two hours before Mom died, the hospice nurse came in to take Mom's vital signs and make sure she was comfortable. She was looking for some chapstick or lip balm to provide some moisture for Mom's parched lips when she found Mom's pink lipstick in the drawer by the sink. The nurse said that would work just as well as chapstick, and proceeded to put the pink lipstick on Mom's lips. Looking back at the fact that Mom died shortly after that, it was almost as if Mom was saying, "I'm not leaving this room until you put my lipstick on me!"

"M" stands for model Christian. The story of Mom's Christian initiation is one I have told many times, because it is such a powerful witness of intentional discipleship. Mom's parents were Catholic, and they had their first two children, Raymond and Florence, baptized. But for some reason

they never had Mom or her younger brother, Eugene, baptized. When Mom was about thirteen years old and her brother was about nine, they went on their own to Saint Casimir Rectory at 22<sup>nd</sup> and Whipple Street, now Our Lady of Tepeyac Parish, rang the doorbell and told the priest they wanted to be baptized. The priest who instructed them in the faith, Father Stanley Rokicinski, affectionately known as "Father Rocky," for many years later remained a close friend of the family, as we would visit him at his parish, and he would come to our house for dinner from time to time. He was the first and, in many ways, the most powerful influence in my own call to be a priest. Even more interesting, though, is the reason why my mother sought baptism. In those days, the 1930's and 40's, it was very common for practicing Catholics to go to confession every Saturday. Mom's best friend was Ramona Pieczynski, after whom my sister Ramona is named. Mom and Ramona Pie (as she was called) used to spend a lot of time together, including on Saturdays when Ramona would go to church for confession. Since Mom was not baptized, young Veronica would just sit in the pew and wait while her friend went to confess her sins. Apparently Mom got tired of just sitting there but knew that the only way she could go to confession was

to get baptized. Mom is the only person I know who sought baptism so she could go to confession!

“M” stands for Mass – as in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. There was never any question on the part of Mom and Dad about going to Mass on Sunday. That was a given. In her later years going to Mass every day became very important to her as well. Mom was a lector and an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion at St. Casimir Parish, Queen of the Universe Parish and St. Bernadette Parish. When she moved from her apartment in Evergreen Park to independent living, it was important for her to go to a place where she could continue to go to Mass every day. That is why she was so pleased to go to Resurrection Retirement Community and then Resurrection Life Center, each with its own chapel where she could go to Mass and receive Holy Communion every day without even leaving the building. As it turns out, my mother’s very last meal was the Eucharist. I celebrated Mass in Mom’s room a week ago Sunday and gave her what we call in Latin *Viaticum*, which means, “food for the journey,” that is, the spiritual food needed for the final journey from this life to the next. I was able to give Mom a small particle of the Host on a spoon with the Precious Blood of Our Lord, which she swallowed. After that, she simply stopped

taking any food or drink until she died on Wednesday afternoon. At that point, the Eucharist was all the food she would need for the final journey!

“M” stands for monotheistic. Now that’s an adjective not often used to describe a person, but in Mom’s case, it was definitely true: she had no false gods. Two weeks ago, after we were told that Mom’s kidneys had begun to shut down, I anointed her with the Sacrament of the Sick and gave her *Viaticum*, Holy Communion for the final journey of her life. Part of the ritual calls for the renewal of baptismal promises if the sick person is lucid enough to do this. At that point, Mom was still able to talk, but was dozing a lot, although she would open her eyes when prompted. The renewal of baptismal promises consists of questions about the person’s monotheistic belief in the Holy Trinity: three persons in one God. After the first question about belief in God the Father, Creator of heaven and earth, Mom responded with a loud, “I DO!” Then as I asked her about her belief in Jesus Christ, Son of the Father, she began to doze off until I prompted her, and she opened her eyes and responded with another hearty, “I DO!” The same happened the third time; when asked about her belief about in God the Holy Spirit, there was another strong proclamation, “I DO!,” after which she promptly went back to sleep!

“M” stands for mystic, which brings us back to Mom’s first name, Veronica, which, as mentioned earlier, means, “true icon.” As my brother Joey will describe in his reflections after Communion, our mother was a true icon of Christ. A mystic is someone who is constantly aware of God’s presence and is in constant communion with Him. An example of this was when my young siblings and I were once again misbehaving. We had just returned from Sunday Mass. Exasperated, Mom simply said, “How can you fight with each other after you have just received Holy Communion and Jesus is still present in your heart?” Well, that certainly stopped us in our tracks and made us think! So as we give thanks in this Eucharist, my family and I thank Mom for all the gifts of faith, hope and love that she shared with us.

When our Dad died in 1997, I said in his funeral homily that he had been leaving us gradually for a number of years due to Alzheimer’s disease. Similarly, our Mom, Veronica Mary Paprocki, had been slowly leaving us for some time and she has now completed her journey from this life to the next, where she had longed to be reunited with her beloved husband, our Dad, John H. Paprocki, Jr., so together they could see God face-to-face.

May God now give her that grace. Amen.