

Lord, Hear Our Prayer

Walking Beside Her at Mass

Thomas Gerrie

May 10, 2026

This morning I picked up my mother and took her to Mass for Mother's Day at Our Lady of the Lake Catholic Church, and maybe what moves me most tonight, sitting here trying to write about it, is the realization that love changes directions so gradually you barely notice until one ordinary day you are helping your mother carefully out of the car because she broke her shoulder a month ago and still wears a sling, watching every curb and uneven step and movement of her body because pain now lives somewhere inside her posture, because she hunches without meaning to and keeps reminding herself softly to stand up straight, and because time has entered her bones in ways it had not when she was the one lifting children into station wagons and buttoning tiny church clothes and leading my sister and me into sanctuaries on Sunday mornings.

And she looked so beautiful today.

She wore a blue dress my sister had picked out for her, elegant and soft and springlike, and she had thought carefully about every detail, the gold in her earrings matching the gold buckle of her belt matching the soft gold in her shoes, and I found the tenderness of this almost unbearable, this eighty-year-old woman with a healing shoulder still wanting very much to look lovely on Mother's Day, still wanting to feel beautiful entering church, and almost immediately two people sitting nearby complimented her dress and her smile and welcomed her warmly, and she glowed a little, genuinely glowed, and I thought there is almost nothing sweeter in the world than watching your mother receive kindness from strangers.

The church itself is under construction, so Mass is being held in the school gymnasium beneath basketball hoops and fluorescent lights, temporary staging and carpeted mats rolled across the hardwood, folding chairs filled with elderly women and walkers and babies chewing pacifiers and children already beginning the long Sunday work of trying to sit still, and I loved something about this too, the grandeur temporarily unavailable, the stained glass and vaulted ceilings replaced by a basketball court, everyone gathering anyway.

I do not know exactly what I believe anymore, although I know some of what I no longer believe.

I do not believe Jesus Christ is literally the son of God, not in the way the Nicene Creed asks me to say it, and I had not attended Mass in years, years and years, but what startled me that morning was how deeply the body remembers after the mind has wandered elsewhere, because before I could consciously summon the words my mouth had already begun speaking them, *Our Father, who art in Heaven*, and later pieces of the Creed rose inside me too, whole phrases waiting where I had left them, as though childhood prayer had been stored somewhere muscular rather than intellectual, somewhere beneath belief itself.

My Ma loves hearing me sing. She tells me I have a nice baritone voice, which is such a mother thing to say, generous and probably exaggerated and offered with absolute sincerity, and so there we were side by side singing hymns beneath basketball hoops while three women near the altar signed every prayer and lyric and Scripture reading for members of the hearing-impaired community seated near the front, their hands moving constantly through the air, *hallelujah* and *amen* and *God* becoming gesture, language becoming motion, and I kept watching them because there was something beautiful about prayer becoming physical, the determination that everyone in the room should be able to receive the same words.

Then came the prayers of intercession, my favorite part of Mass when I was young and, I discovered, still my favorite now.

The petitions moved outward through the gymnasium and far beyond it, toward the people of Ukraine and the people of Russia, toward the people of Iran, toward people living inside wars most of us in that room would never see, and then somehow back toward us again, toward the sick and the dying in this parish, toward those who had lost someone they loved, toward people without homes in our own city, toward strangers whose names I would never know, and after each petition hundreds of people bowed their heads and answered together:

Lord, hear our prayer.

I said it too.

Lord, hear our prayer.

Whatever else I no longer believe, I have not lost the wish contained inside those words, this beautiful instinct to interrupt our own lives long enough to ask for mercy on behalf of someone we will never meet, to say aloud that suffering on the other side of the world belongs for a moment inside this school gymnasium too.

Lord, hear our prayer.

The faith that raised me contains contradictions I no longer know how to reconcile, an ancient faith that has wounded and healed, excluded and welcomed, justified cruelty and inspired astonishing acts of mercy, and yet it also helped form my mother into the woman

sitting beside me, a woman who took her children to volunteer in soup kitchens at St. Barnabas Episcopal Church and taught us, mostly by ordinary example, that other people mattered. That morning there were collections for St. Vincent de Paul, announcements about the Mother and Child Education Center, volunteers preparing to carry the Eucharist to people who could no longer come to Mass themselves, small systems built around the proposition that someone should go toward the person who cannot come toward us.

Faith survives partly because people cannot bear the thought of abandoning one another completely.

There was a baptism too.

A little girl named Amelia was welcomed into the church while the congregation applauded, and my mother smiled at this child she had never met, and around us were babies and grandparents and exhausted middle-aged parents and elderly widows and children squirming through hymns and people speaking songs with their hands, generations crowded together on folding chairs beneath basketball hoops, and I thought about the extraordinary human desire to hand things forward, names and stories and rituals and songs, to place something into the hands of the people coming after us before our own hands are gone.

Then Father Kearn asked all the mothers to stand.

They rose throughout the gymnasium, some easily and some slowly and some with help, and beside me my mother carefully pushed herself upward with one arm because the other remained held against her body in the sling, and suddenly I could see her age in a way I had spent much of the morning trying not to see it, the effort required simply to stand, the pain she quietly accommodates now, the body that once lifted me learning its own new limitations.

Father Kearn began praying over the mothers.

I looked at mine standing there in her blue dress, gold at her ears and waist and feet, beneath fluorescent lights in a temporary church built inside a school gymnasium, and the thought came to me with such clarity that I wished immediately not to have thought it: There will be a last Mass we attend together.

Neither of us will know it is the last one.

There will simply be some Sunday when we walk out together, talking about the homily or where we are going afterward, and one of us will close the church door behind us for the last time.

When communion came, I leaned toward her and whispered, almost like a confession, "I'm not going to receive communion."

She turned to me, surprised.

"You're not? Why not?"

And there it was, the distance that eventually opens even between people who love one another completely, because there was a time when this woman knew nearly everything inside me, every fever and nightmare and scraped knee, what I had eaten and where I had been and whether I had said my prayers, and now there were whole provinces of my inner life she could visit only if I invited her. I told her quietly that receiving communion did not feel honest because I no longer believed what receiving it would ask me to profess.

She looked a little sad.

But she did not argue.

When our row moved, we stood and walked forward together.

My mother received the Eucharist.

When my turn came, I crossed my arms over my chest and received a blessing.

Then I followed her back to our seats.

I think I will remember that walk for the rest of my life, not because either of us changed the other's mind, and not because the distance between what she believes and what I believe disappeared, but because for those few steps it did not need to. She went forward as herself. I went forward as myself. We went together.

Afterward we walked slowly back toward the car, arm in arm, and she talked happily about Father Kearn and the homily and the signing community and the choir and the baptism and how much she loved the parish and how grateful she was that I had taken her, and before getting into the car she stopped and smoothed the blue dress with her free hand. For a moment I could see both of them.

The eighty-year-old woman beside me, one arm in a sling, careful at curbs now, reminding herself to stand straight.

And the younger mother I remember leading my sister and me into church, buttoning our clothes and carrying whatever mothers carry invisibly for their children, all the worry and expectation and enormous unreasonable hope.

That morning she had walked beside me toward communion knowing I would not receive it.

Now I walked beside her toward the car, watching the curb.

Perhaps this is one of the directions love eventually turns, the hand that once reached down for yours becoming the hand you reach out to steady, the person who once walked slowly because your legs were small becoming the person for whom you slow your own steps, neither of you announcing that anything has changed.

And then I drove her home.

We sat around the kitchen table for a while, my mother and my father and my sister and me, talking the way families talk when there is nowhere else anyone needs to be just yet, the great theological questions of the morning giving way to whatever was on the table between us, to the ordinary news of our lives, and I was grateful for that too, grateful that the morning did not end at the church door or beside the car with some large revelation, but here, at my parents' kitchen table, with the people who had been there long before I began deciding what I believed.

My mother was still wearing the blue dress.

Her arm was still in the sling.

And somewhere in me the words remained, whether as prayer or memory or hope I could no longer say.

Lord, hear our prayer.