

St. Mary the Virgin / Mother of Our Lord Jesus Christ

Church of the Transfiguration / New York, NY

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Readings: Isaiah 61:10-11; Psalm 34:1-8; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 1:46-55

A cruel twist of fate tore them apart - but a Hudson River victim and the widow he left behind will now be linked forever by a pair of golden rings.

Before the body of Michele Norelli was sealed in a coffin and flown to Italy Wednesday, his loved ones placed inside a ring inscribed with his wife's name. An identical ring bearing Norelli's name will be given to widow Silvia Rigamonti, when relatives return to their hometown near Bologna.

The couple was in New York to celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary, a joyful trip that turned tragic when a small plane collided with a tour helicopter over the river.

Norelli, his son Filippo, age 16 and three family friends perished in Saturday's crash. Silvia Rigamonti decided at the last minute not to get on the doomed chopper and has since returned home.

The ring was dropped inside Norelli's coffin before he and the four other Italians were remembered Wednesday at a prayer service (at Frank E. Campbell's) led by Fr. Jonathan Morris of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral in SoHo.

Richard Schapiro, NY Daily News
August 12, 2009
(edited)

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I was at a hospice volunteer training class last Saturday when my Blackberry signaled a message. It was a News Alert from the NY Times flashing the news that a tourist helicopter and a small plane had collided in the sky above the Hudson River and dropped straight down into it. From the earliest reports it was clear that this one was not going to end with good news of survivors floating in their respective aircraft on the surface of the Hudson. As the story unfolded further through the afternoon and evening hours, the possibility of anyone surviving was set aside to begin search efforts to recover the victim's bodies.

Early on, too, it was reported that there was this wife and mother, Silvia, who at the last moment had not gotten on the helicopter and while she did not directly see the collision, was soon aware of the unfolding tragedy on the river. Since this sermon was already on my mind, I wondered if she or any of the others witnessing the events at the river that day invoked Mary in prayer or called upon Mary as the Mother of Sorrows, consoling themselves and finding their own fear and pain embraced in Mary's pain at the foot of the cross.

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St. Mary, the Virgin, Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, is celebrated as a major feast day in our Episcopal liturgical calendar on August 15th each year. As it is liturgically permissible, our rector transferred the celebration to this day, so that we might give special reflection and devotion upon the life of Mary during our Sunday celebration of the Holy Eucharist.

Called the Second Eve by the early Church fathers, Mary has been venerated from the earliest times of the Church, of course, but during and following the Protestant Reformation she was set so far to the side in the calendars and devotion of the Protestant church traditions that her “blessed” status was lost sight of for many of us.

Her place on the calendar marks a restoration within our Episcopal Church of the blessed honor the Scriptures assign to Mary: “*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb,*” exclaims a filled-with-the-Holy Spirit Elizabeth to Mary in Luke 1:42.

Because of its Anglo-Catholic tradition, this parish has long honored Mary and as a premier church embracing the tenets of the Oxford Movement and Tractarian thought in the 19th and 20th centuries, even helped lead the way for our national Episcopal Church to return Mary to her rightful place as pre-eminent among the saints. We honor her as the Theotokos, the God-bearer, the “fountain of grace” whom God favored and chose to be the Mother of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

In fact, Mary is honored throughout this marvelous church and its chapels, so rich in art, stained glass and sculpture. One of the first visual representations seen as one looks down the aisle to the high altar are the Venetian mosaic rondels on either side of the chancel arch with the Archangel Gabriel (on the left) announcing the birth of the Incarnate Son of God to the Blessed Virgin Mary (on the right).

And, of course, at the end of the South Transept aisle is the Madonna Shrine, where Blessed Mary holds her Holy Child. Designed by Ralph Adams Cram, the shrine was constructed in the 1920’s and just recently made available and visible again after being closed due to the construction of Transfiguration House.

And the most amazing of all is the Chapel of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the small chapel on the south side of the Holy Family Chapel. I think it’s not often seen, but it contains wonderful stained glass windows that are copies of famous paintings, including Raphael’s *Madonna del Granduca* and Botticelli’s *Virgin and Child*. The glass doors separating the Lady Chapel from the larger chapel have 12 panels showing scenes in the life of Mary, from the Annunciation to her death. And adjoining it at the entrance is yet another *Madonna and Child*, a tender carving in white marble. And to me the most wonderful thing about the Lady Chapel these days is that it is often used for church school, where our smallest members sit at child sized tables and chairs to learn about

Jesus and Mary, as well as other Bible stories of our Christian faith. How better to honor the Blessed Mother than to have little children lovingly taught in the chapel dedicated to her honor.

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For many years while doing grief counseling in Syracuse, I co-led a bereavement group called M.O.M.S., an acronym for *Mother's of Murdered Sons*. A mother whose son was shot and killed on a playground as he played basketball had started it. Her devastation was so total she knew she could not make it alone and, thus, the group was born. The group grew to include many additional mothers all of whose sons (or daughters) were murdered on the streets, porches, living rooms and bedrooms of the city. Fathers came, too, of course, as well as sons and daughters, sisters and brothers. But it was the mothers who drove the group, mothers whose wombs and arms ached from the killing of their children and who needed to be together in support and solidarity.

Many times as I sat with them, yet another Marian image, that of Michelangelo's *Pieta`* came into my mind, the magnificent sculpture of Mary silently lamenting as she holds the dead body of the crucified Jesus across her lap. Mary, grieving with deep sorrow, wondering what God was doing in the midst of her loss and pain. Sometimes when I didn't know what to say, I would think of that image of Mary, who offers a presence for the pain of all those who come to her for a healing and hopeful word. In Mary, many have found a Holy Mother who truly knows our sorrows and needs.

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What else does Mary have to teach us about living, about magnifying the Lord with all of our soul, body and mind? Over the centuries Mary has had differing places of honor and piety among the Christian faithful. In his book *All Saints. Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time* (Crossroad Publishing, 1997), Robert Ellsberg notes this:

In the past it was common to emphasize the ways in which Mary was set apart from and above all other women and the ordinary conditions of humanity. Today there is a new emphasis on her status as a woman of the people and her solidarity with the rest of humanity. A "Mariology from above" emphasized God's initiative in selecting Mary for her part in the divine mystery of redemption. In contrast, a "Mariology from below" begins with the poor woman, Mary of Nazareth, who was rooted in the faith and struggles of her people, subject to the cruelties of the world, and heir to the ancient hope for deliverance and salvation. In this light, Mary is not so much honored for her special nature as for her exceptional faith. (p.9)

Indeed, it is her exceptional faith that we honor and seek to find as well in our life experience. At the Annunciation, Mary barely knew what God was calling upon her to

do, calling her to become and to experience. Perplexed, doubtful, and ponderous, Mary still made space for the work of God in her life.

It was in the space created by her faith – and not solely in the space of her womb – that the Word became flesh. In the space created by faith, Mary was able to say “let it be with me according to your word.” She opened herself for the birth of the Eternal Word.

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This parish community has been known for making space for others to know the love of God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Whether it is the iconic story of Joseph Jefferson finding a welcome space here for the funeral of his actor friend, George Holland....or the space offered as a way station in the Underground Railway during the Civil War...or the safe haven provided in the face of the Draft Riots...or the space provided to thousands of brides and grooms to marry here, especially before so many of the men went off to war. In all of these well-known instances and in many smaller unrecorded circumstances, the Church of the Transfiguration has been a space of welcome, grace, forgiveness and love.

I believe that the Church of the Transfiguration is poised at the beginning of a time of new growth in which we will need to make space in faithful obedience to all that God is calling us to be and become, as a parish community.

- Our building is renewed and restored;
- Transfiguration House, our new parish house, gives us new visibility and possibility.
- The restoration of the garden and new neighbors in the surrounding high rises are already providing many opportunities to faithfully make space for the new person coming in to pray or to join worship for the very first time.

For all of these reasons I have been working with Bp. Andrew and the Vestry to form a New Member Ministry Committee, in order to take deliberate steps to shape how we welcome the newcomer and genuinely incorporate him or her into the body of Christ that is our parish. Something as simple as the “3-minute Rule at Coffee Hour” by which you spend the first 3-minutes saying hello to someone you don’t yet know before you talk with your friends can go far in making a welcome space for the first time visitor or someone coming to our church for several months as they decide about joining.

As we honor the Blessed Virgin Mary this day, may we faithfully allow God to use the space of our lives and of this parish community to experience new life in Christ Jesus.
AMEN.