

A fond farewell

One of my earliest articles for "Madonna" spirituality magazine was a reflection on some of the escapades of my Italian grandfather, 'Nonno' as he was affectionately known in our family. I described him then, at the age of 92, as the epitome of hope, enthusiasm, innovation and the drive to 'get on with it!' ("Andiamo!")

As I write this, it has been four years since we farewelled and buried Nonno. The circumstances of his death said something about the vitality of his life. He suffered a fatal heart attack at the motor registry office. As was his annual practice, and just weeks short of his 97th birthday, he was there to renew his driver's license!

Amidst all the family activity, prayers and eulogies that went with the farewelling of Nonno, one moment stays with me: my time spent alone with the body of my grandfather shortly after his death. By coincidence, it happened that I was the first to arrive at the hospital. I was by his side, even before his son and his daughter had arrived. And what a beautiful, undeserved privilege I found that to be.

My usual experience of the death of an extended family member is that I am at least ten people removed from the actual event of death. There is a whole line of people who (quite appropriately) have seen and tended the deceased person before I have even heard the news of the death. Now, quite

unexpectedly, I was the first in line. And I was alone. Perhaps it was the 'aloneness' that gave the experience that edge of beauty and privilege. Just me and Nonno. Even the unpleasantness of the tubes protruding from his lifeless body – signs of an earlier futile struggle to revive him – couldn't detract from the intimacy of the moment.

Of course, Nonno wasn't actually there. That was obvious the moment I laid eyes on him. But his body was there. And although it didn't quite look like him without the living breath of his spirit, it was still Nonno's visible humanity that I could see and touch.

I was trying to understand why this experience stays with me, and why it was so filled with grace rather than pain. I think it had something to do with the awareness that death signals the passage from this life into the arms of the Father, an unimaginable intimacy where one stands naked and unshielded before the mystery of Love. The moment is hidden from us this side of the grave. And yet, is it presumptuous to suggest that by drawing close to the one who departs, by uniting our heart with theirs, we are afforded a silent glimpse of what 'no eye has seen'?

In any case, how could I begrudge my 97 year old grandfather, having lived life so passionately in this world, for leaving us for 'the real world' when God called him? It was sheer blessing to be there, as

an empty-handed witness to his homecoming. True, I did not witness the actual moment of death. Yet I was as close to it as any family member could have been given the circumstances, and I will always treasure that. •

