

Franz and Margaret Oppenheimer

It ought to be an easy thing for us to let go of Margaret and Franz. After all, they were happily married for 70 years and both lived into their 90s. They enjoyed health that allowed them to live in their own home until the last year and they zooted around in their Volkswagen Bug long after most of us thought that that was wise. How much more could we have wished for them? What must we expect if we are unsatisfied with what we have been given, when we have been given so much?

Of course, the very fact of something being desirable is what makes us want more of it. We never seem to feel we have had enough of what we enjoy and always feel that we have had too much of what we do not like. That seems to be a prominent characteristic of the human condition in this fallen world. I suppose it is too much to think that we can conquer it now.

I cannot speak about many things in Margaret and Franz's lives. I knew them for about 22 years, I think, but that is more of my life than it was of theirs. I knew them at church and around town and saw them virtually every week, unless they were off in Connecticut or London, when they still spent time there. They always seemed such a devoted couple and would almost always appear in tandem, being past the stage of splitting up to cover children's activities and the competing pulls of home and work. It is an easy thing to think of them as a single unit, but that would be to sell both of them, and the experience of being a human being, short.

One of the things that struck me most about the two of them was not how much they were similar but how **different** they were in the things that they talked about with me. Margaret wrote a short autobiography for me to have while writing this talk and it reflects very clearly what I saw in her. She speaks of her brother, Edward, who died suddenly at age 13; of her mother, who founded a school in New Haven while her father was off with an expedition to Macchu Picchu (which surprised him greatly on his return); of her meeting Franz and helping him face turning from Medicine to Law; of their time in New York City, while she taught school and he served as a law clerk and then their move to Georgetown to raise their children away from the Big City. She wrote of working to try to help along the racial integration of life in the District of Columbia and how exciting it was to think that one could make a positive difference. All of this, of course, was in the background of raising three children in Washington and enjoying the intellectual opportunities that Georgetown afforded. This was just the sort of tale I expected from the woman who always had ideas about what to study in classes after church and who always wanted to talk about Ethics, "something real", as she would say, instead of abstract Theology. The world fascinated Margaret and she wanted to jump right in and wrestle with it!

Franz, whose life was spent in the legal world, seemed to get enough of that in his daily life. He seemed to me to be of a mystical turn of mind; perhaps it was a result of being a convert from Judaism to Christianity (though he remained a proud Jew all his life) or perhaps it was because he was the sort of person who reflects on where he is in life, and where he might like to be, which made him the kind of person who could consider conversion.

Franz came to me once, after church, and asked "How can we love God, when He is beyond our understanding? How can we try to 'love' Him, as we are commanded to do, if we cannot know Him? Can love exist without knowledge?" Well, that's a pretty big topic, so I asked him for time

to think about it and offered to preach on it the next Sunday. After that sermon, as he was on his way downstairs, I shook his hand and asked him whether that had “helped”; he said, “No, but thank you for trying.” About a year later, he told me that he was still wondering about that central religious matter of the difficulty of loving God. Again, I offered to try to tackle it in an organized way and did what I could. Again, I asked him after the service whether I had addressed his questions and he smiled and said, “No, but thank you for trying.” At least twice more over the years, as I look back, he pulled me aside and said to me, “Now, **that** lesson (or sermon) began to get to the heart of the matter.” I could never get him to admit that we had really gotten to the nub of the puzzle, but I could see that his question was not idle or artificial; and I could also see that he kept it in his heart and “pondered it”¹, as Mary does with all the odd events that surround the birth of her son in *The Gospel according to St. Luke*. Franz wanted to know how to draw closer to God and kept mulling that desire over in his mind, which is just what priests like to hear about their parishioners!

When I went to see Margaret and Roxana the morning after Franz had died, Margaret wanted to talk about him, naturally. We sat and she told over again some stories I had heard and some I had not. She wanted to get a service for him set, as a way of taking care of him to the end, I think. One thing she said to me stuck in my mind: “He was the only man I was ever in love with.” What a wonderful thing to know and to be able to tell yourself after you have lost a spouse! They were very close and quite complementary. If what professors like to say when they are getting their students ready for “Religion 101” exams is accurate: “Judaism is a religion of Ethics and Behavior, while Christianity is, fundamentally, a mystical religion”, then, I suppose, in some ways, Margaret was the Jew in that marriage and Franz was the Christian.

I do not now, nor did I ever, think that they were perfect people. Anyway, one of the few things we really **know** is that there **aren't** any perfect people, for

“All have sinned and come short of the glory of God”²

as St. Paul reminds us. Still, I do notice that those who knew Margaret and Franz miss them and wish they had them still. My youngest daughter, who was, for 17 years, the youngest member of our parish and is, by my reckoning, 75 years younger than Franz, when told that he had died, said, “But, he was my buddy. Who will I eat chocolate cake with, now?” I have heard it said that people’s size can be measured by how large a space they leave when they are gone. Margaret and Franz leave **three** large spaces behind them, at least: one for each of them and one for the two of them, together. Can any of us hope to do more than that?

¹ *Luke* 2:19

² *Romans* 3:23