

Vol. 1, No. 17 • May 2, 1984

A supplement to Catholic newspapers, published by the National Catholic News Service, 1312 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20005. All contents copyright © 1984 by NC News Service.

□ Faith Today

Death in the family

By Patricia Davis
NC News Service

The phone was ringing with special insistency as I walked into the parish office one Monday morning in early March.

"I'll bet that's Mrs. Johnson," I thought as I hurried to the desk. "Who else would call at this hour?"

Now in her 80s, Mrs. Johnson was a lifelong parishioner. She knew everybody in the parish and made everyone's business her own. But staff and parishioners alike respected her and her care for the community.

That morning Mrs. Johnson's message was typically direct and particularly urgent: "Pat, I want you to visit some friends of mine because Lewis is dying. What time can you pick me up?"

A few hours later, as the two of us drove to a modest suburb, Mrs. Johnson filled in some details about the family. I'll call them the Hanks family here.

□ □ □

She had known the family for a long time and was an unofficial grandmother to them — as she was to many others. Somehow, years before, she had persuaded Margaret Hanks and the three children to be baptized; but they had remained uncatechized and rarely went to church.

Several weeks ago when Lewis was diagnosed as having terminal cancer, he too had been baptized. Now it was my job to prepare the family for his death.

My education and experience in nursing and theology were supplemented by intense silent prayer during the final few minutes of our drive.

Margaret Hanks' tearful, warm welcome eased my nervousness, and I soon found myself sitting at the edge of Lewis' bed, listening as he and Margaret told their story.

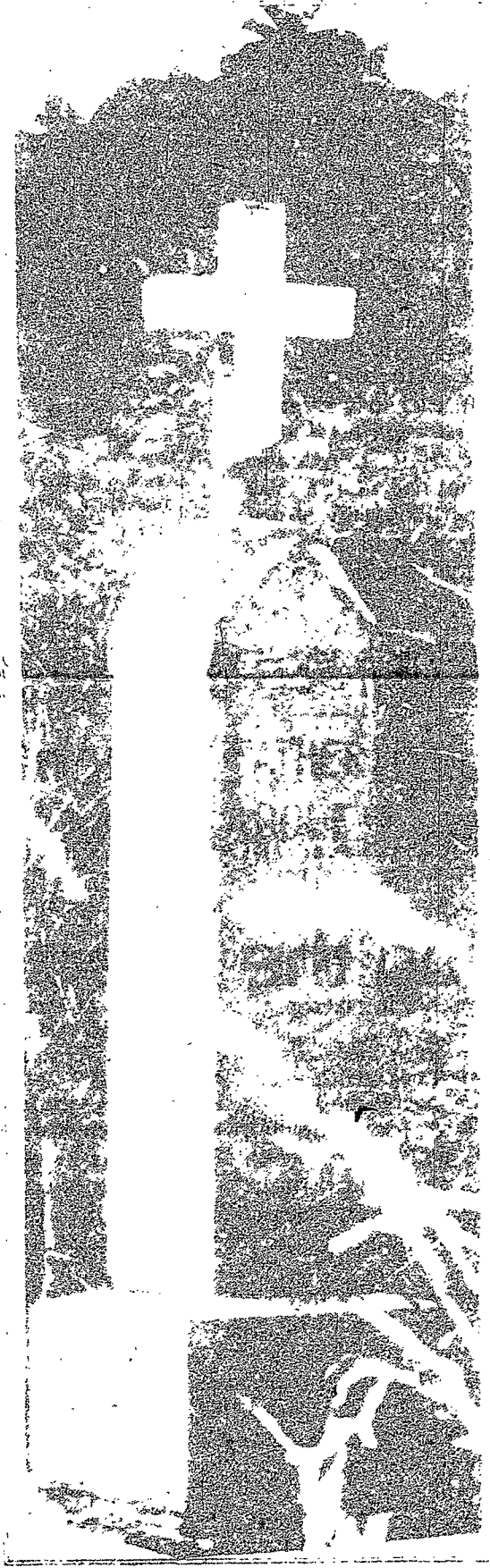
Lewis was thin and looked tired, but he did not really seem sick. And, he said, except for a growing fatigue, he felt fine.

Margaret picked up the conversation's thread. One morning in February Lewis was — uncharacteristically — too tired to go to work.

When Margaret returned from her own job and found Lewis in bed, she insisted that he visit the emergency room of a nearby hospital. Several days of tests followed, and then the diagnosis: inoperable lung cancer.

Lewis was told he probably had about three months to live.

Our first conversation marked the beginning of a long and special friendship. I spent many more hours perched



When death approaches, the dying person is not the only one who needs to prepare, writes Patricia Davis. Through times of sickness and death, life goes on for the family of the person about to die. They need the faith and courage to face death, and the continuation of life.

at the corner of Lewis' bed learning to know and love the Hanks family.

Margaret and Lewis told me about their near divorce several years earlier, for example. They had fought to save a marriage which I now saw growing stronger with each passing, precious day.

I watched as the oldest child, a son on the verge of manhood, watched his father die. I saw the young man balance a desire for independence with new and heavy burdens.

I prayed with Lewis and his family. We remembered Jesus' promise of life in abundance and clung to that hope in the face of death.

I sat with Margaret at her kitchen table and talked for hours about arrangements for Lewis' death and beyond. No one in her family could bear to discuss funeral plans or what it would be like to be a widow at 40. But Margaret needed to look ahead to those realities.

A priest came to the Hanks' home to celebrate the sacrament of the anointing of the sick, and not long afterward Lewis was moved to a hospice.

Relieved of the physical burden of his care, some of Margaret's strength returned. Counseling was available for all in the family. At the hospice, Margaret and the children were able to be with their husband and father at any hour in a home-like setting, where staff, volunteers and the families of other patients offered constant support.

Lewis' pain was well-controlled. He remained alert, but the need for words decreased. Sometimes I just sat beside him, holding his hand.

He had already lived twice as long as expected when he returned to his home in September. And he would live two months longer.

□ □ □

Margaret's call came on a Friday evening. "He stepped over," she said. Several times that day Lewis had asked her if she were all right. Then, while Margaret and the children were sitting on his bed, talking and watching television, Lewis squeezed Margaret's hand and died.

Preparing for Lewis' funeral I felt sorrow, relief and genuine gratitude. It would not be hard to speak of the seed which dies in order to bring forth life, and to celebrate with joy.

In the courage and faith of these friends, I had already witnessed resurrection.

(Ms. Davis is a nurse, theologian and freelance writer in the Washington, D.C. area.)