

What's the Holy Father To Do With a Mother Like Rosie O'Donnell?

Recognition of Colette Volkema DeNooyer

Scripture: I Corinthians 13; Matthew 18:10-14, 19:13-16

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Thirteen years ago when Colette joined the team, she used to chastise me a bit for the prosaic nature of the titles of my sermons, lacking all creativity and invitation, so I thought that, on this the day on which we honor her ministry as she lays it down, I should extend myself in finding an interesting title. After the long service last week, someone came up to me in the courtyard and said, "Dick, I'm going to cancel," and I thought, "Oh, no, I've lost another one." But, he said, "I'm going to cancel my trip up north because of the sermon title next week." Actually, the sermon title doesn't have anything to do with Colette. As a matter of fact, it flashed into my mind in a moment's time before this day was ever set as the day to honor her. It flashed into my mind in a moment, and I knew I had my Mother's Day sermon, and I even contemplated, when we determined this to be the day we should honor Colette, if I should change the sermon. But, on more reflection, I thought, "No, I think it fits."

"What's the Holy Father To Do With a Mother Like Rosie O'Donnell?" Rosie O'Donnell, the talk show host on television, comedienne. I have never seen one of her programs; I know very little about her. My research assistant, Char Zoet, at the library, dug up all kinds of interesting information which saved me, having already proclaimed my determination to speak about Rosie O'Donnell. But, on one of those times that I moved from my loft through the bedroom and into the bathroom, which I do on occasion while Nancy is watching television (I say to her, "Are the Red Wings ahead," or "Are the Pistons winning?" or whatever, and then I retreat again to Jesus and the loft), but, on this particular evening, Diane Sawyer was interviewing Rosie O'Donnell, and I paused long enough to realize that I must sit down and listen, and I was deeply moved. I was touched, because I saw embodied the kind of love and grace that I wish were always the hallmark of the Christian community, for Rosie O'Donnell, in her interview with Diane Sawyer, was coming out of the closet and declaring herself to be gay, not in order that she might tell the whole world of her sexual orientation because she says, "It was never really a very big deal for me," but, she came out of the closet and on national television wanted to be known as a gay parent, and the reason she

wanted to be known as a gay parent was that she has entered a crusade, a crusade that would help people to understand that to be a parent, to be a good parent, has nothing to do with one's sexual orientation.

It happened that Rosie O'Donnell, who has adopted three children of her own, became aware of a situation in Florida where a family was being threatened by the Florida agencies that were going to take away a young man who had been with this couple for ten years. The couple has gathered together a family, five children, black and white, all five of them HIV positive. Diane Sawyer interviewed the children. They were well groomed and well spoken and obviously a tight family unit who gave every evidence of being very, very normal, and very much in love with their family, and with their two gay men parents. When Rosie learned that Bert, who had been with them for ten years, might be taken away because, in Florida, if you're gay, you cannot adopt, she went into the trenches, and she determined herself to say, "Look, I'm gay. I'm a gay parent, and I'm a good parent, and I care about children, and to discriminate against gay people as parents is to deny the hundreds of thousands of children who have no parents or home to call their own."

Rosie one day saw the story of Amanda on television, a little five-year-old who had been raped and beaten. Through a long story to which I cannot go, she finally found this little girl in a home with twenty others from five to seventeen. She related to all of them, took a picture of each one, but finally was able to get aside with Amanda, giving her a Beanie Bunny, and then Amanda looked at her affectionately and asked, "What's your name?" Rosie said, "Roseann." Amanda said, "Amanda." As she went to leave, Rosie couldn't quite let her go, and so she said, "I have a gift for you," and Amanda lifted up her Beanie Bunny and said, "You have already given me a gift," and Rosie reached into her pocket and brought out a polished stone on which was inscribed, "Love." She said to Amanda, "Every time you see this stone, know that I love you and there are a lot of people that love you and care for you."

What's the Holy Father to do with a mother like Rosie O'Donnell? I use the Holy Father, of course, only as a symbol of the Church. The poor man has enough on his plate at this time without having to deal with Rosie O'Donnell. But I use him as a symbol for the Church at large which finds it so hard to learn the lesson of the Apostle Paul who said that love is finally all that matters, and all that lasts eternally. As I thought of the love embodied in Rosie and her care and her compassion for children, it is a love unlike the saccharin, sweet, sentimentality of a Hallmark card, but it is the love that gets involved and engaged. It is the love whose passion is committed to justice and to the well-being of others, and in Rosie's case, to the well-being of children.

I thought what better model on Mother's Day than to say, really, all that matters is love. That kind of love. And the reason I thought it would apply to Colette, as well, is because she was an "abused child." She had to go to Sunday School and

Catechism, and like most of us, she suffered through that and she pledged to herself that she would do something better for her children. And so she created the Worship Center. She created all of the stories, the curriculum, and she perfected the method, and she blessed her children and the children of us all, and the children of hundreds of congregations scattered about whose leaders she has trained. It was because of her passion for children, her love for children that she gave of herself, her energy, her mind and her heart to the creation of this marvelous program which, although she lays down the mantle, will go on to continue to bless our children and our children's children, I trust.

And then there was another reason ... It is because beyond her skills as a Christian educator, Colette went on to further her education, to gain her ordination, and in our midst she has become a preacher extraordinaire, and she has preached intelligently and passionately and she has not backed away from being a prophetic voice in our midst. In the midst of the team, as well, she has spearheaded a programmatic dimension of this ministry, for example, with Peter Theune, inaugurating our ministry to people with homosexual orientation, leading to the ongoing program of the Circle of Friends and the creation here of a community that has lost its fear and, in love, has been able to embrace all people, so that we have the marvelous experience of seeing love literally melt barriers and build marvelous relationships in a community that has been able to move beyond bias and prejudice and fear and alienation and become, perhaps, just a little bit, the embodiment of what a Rosie O'Donnell is on the broader screen of the world today.

And so, Colette has been creator of Worship Center, prophetic voice, but I suppose, finally, the storyteller with the children gathered 'round her, and the image with which we will always hold her is that marvelous image in the Gospel of Jesus who, when the disciples tried to push away the mothers with their children, Jesus said, "Let them come, for to such belongs the kingdom," and he took them on his lap and he blessed them.

What's the Holy Father to do with a mother like Rosie O'Donnell? I don't really know, but this somewhat less than holy father would say, "Bless you, Rosie. Bless you, Colette. *Thank God for you both.*"