

Margaret Mary Kelly, 82, Wants to Marry Paddy Regan, 84

By Donal Mahoney

Father Brennan had been pastor of St. Ignatius Church for 20 years, a long time for any one priest to remain at one parish. Usually the archbishop would transfer a pastor after he had served seven years. By that time, parishioners might have needed a fresh face and fresher homilies and the pastor, truth be told, might like to see a few new faces himself in the pews every Sunday morning.

That wasn't the case with Father Brennan, however. St. Ignatius was a parish in decline in terms of parishioners and he loved those who were still there, the ones who hadn't moved or passed away. There were only about 60 people left now, most of them widows and widowers as well as one nice elderly maiden who had never married, Margaret Mary Kelly, who studied early in life to become a nun but ultimately decided that life as a nun was not for her. She moved back home to care for her aging parents and did a fine job. Her father died at 84 and her mother at 81.

Margaret Mary herself now was 82. That's why Father Brennan was surprised to hear--word travels like a rabbit in a small parish--that Margaret Mary was thinking of marrying a widower older than she was, a man named Paddy Regan, 84, who lived in another parish a few miles away. She had never in her life shown any interest in marriage. Nor did she ever have to fight any men off. She was a fine woman not known for her comeliness as much as for her wit and her holiness.

Father Brennan didn't know what to think.

"Well," he said to himself over a cup of tea, "if Margaret Mary wants to get married, we'll do our best for her. I just hope the groom-to-be is in fine health. The two of them may not realize that in the Catholic Church a couple must be able to engage in sexual intercourse or the marriage would be null and void. I know they have all these medications now to give a man a boost but at 84 a man might need a rocket to get the job done."

Sure enough, two weeks later, Margaret Mary rang the rectory door bell and asked to see Father Brennan. He was about to eat lunch but asked her to come right into his small library where they could sit and talk.

"I'm planning on marrying Paddy Regan, Father, a widower one parish over," Margaret Mary began, "and I thought I should come see you to make the arrangements. At our age, Paddy and I would like to get married as soon as we can."

Even though we have no serious health problems, God might call either one of us any day now. So we'd like to take our vows and, as they say, start living happily ever after, however long that might be."

Father Brennan didn't know how to begin to approach the potential problem of the couple's physical readiness to engage in the conjugal act, the Church's official term for sexual intercourse within a marriage. Even if Margaret Mary had brought Paddy Regan with her, it wouldn't have been any easier to approach the subject of Mr. Regan's potency or lack thereof. Father Brennan figured Margaret Mary might be marrying for companionship as might Mr. Regan. Every once in awhile, however, another Hugh Hefner pops up but that had happened only once before at St. Ignatius parish and the man, a legend in the neighborhood, died on his honeymoon, blissful, Father Brennan hoped, at age 87.

"Well, Margaret Mary," Father Brennan said, "you say you and Paddy are both in good health. Does he get out and about or sit around all day watching TV?"

Margaret Mary didn't know what to say except that Paddy Regan had struck her as being in fine shape, no matter the fact that he was into his eighties. After all, he had been a widower for three years so he must know what he wanted to do. Besides, he had been married twice before and both wives had died of natural causes. The first one had given him six children and the second one had given him another five. All of the children, well into adulthood now, were married, had good jobs and were a joy to Paddy. Besides, he didn't drink or smoke and could dance much younger women to the point of being too tired to continue. Light on his feet, Paddy was.

Father Brennan's reluctance in getting down to business had a lot to do with knowing Margaret Mary had once studied to be a nun and had spent the rest of her life taking care of her aging parents. She was a very spiritual woman. When possible, she used to bring her parents to daily Mass until they got too sick to come. After both had died, she herself attended daily Mass at 6:30 a.m. and had been doing that for at least 15 years. He doubted Margaret Mary knew much about sex, never mind the Church's requirement that any man seeking to marry had to be capable of having sexual intercourse. There would be no pass for Paddy Regan if he couldn't deliver the goods, as Father Brennan liked to think of it. God bless Paddy if he's up to it, Father thought, and then chastised himself for the unintended pun.

"Well, Margaret Mary, I know that you and Paddy won't be having a family but tell me are you sure he's looking for a wife and not a housekeeper?"

This comment did not sit too well with Margaret Mary, who rustled in her seat.

"Father, I told Paddy Regan there would be no messing around till I had a ring on my finger and we had said our vows. I told him I was a virgin and I would remain a virgin if we didn't get married. The man has had two wives, Father, and 11 children. I don't think he's looking for a housekeeper. He has a daughter who comes over twice a week to clean his house and she does a fine job of it. No, he's looking for a wife, I can tell you that. We have only kissed and hugged but he doesn't kiss me the way he might kiss his sister who, God bless her, is still going strong at 90, having been widowed twice herself. If I had a brother, I'd introduce him to her. A very nice woman."

Father Brennan decided he probably had to get to the point.

"Margaret Mary, your intended has had sex for most of his adult life and this will be something new for you. I imagine you have some idea what to expect if Paddy is still able to make love. Some men at his age aren't capable of doing that any more. You are probably aware of the physical aspects of marriage, I'm sure, and what will be expected of Paddy in the marital embrace." Marital embrace was another term the clergy used when discussing sexual intercourse.

Margaret Mary took a deep breath, uncrossed her legs and looked Father Brennan right in the eye.

"Father, all we have done is kiss and hug but on his birthday Paddy asked me to sit on his lap and give him a big kiss. Well, if he's not healthy enough to have sex, Father, I wish he had taken that crowbar out of his pocket. Scared the dickens out of me. I almost jumped off his lap. Can we get down to business now and set the date. Paddy and I aren't getting any younger."

Father Brennan coughed, looked at his desk calendar and said "How about four weeks from now? That will give us time to announce the bans of marriage in church and do everything right. And, of course, I'd like to meet Paddy Regan myself so I'll recognize him at the ceremony. I'd hate to make a mistake and marry you off to the best man."

Margaret Mary Kelly left the rectory that day happy to have the date for her wedding set.

That night, Father Brennan called another priest a few parishes over and told him about the upcoming wedding without mentioning any names.

They both had a bit of a chuckle and marveled at how hope springs eternal in the people of God, whatever their age.

Then the other priest, before hanging up, said he'd bet the flower girl will be at least 65.