

Rape and Adoption: One Woman's Story

by Joan Frawley Desmond

BELMONT, Calif. — Kathy Folan was a junior in college, discerning a religious vocation, when a missing house key and a few beers changed everything. Now in her late 40s, Folan spoke with the Register about that fateful day in 1990, when she was a student at the Ignatius Institute, a Great Books program based at the University of San Francisco, and joined friends at the college bar to celebrate “senior night.”

It was a lighthearted evening. And when she discovered that her apartment key was missing, she didn't think twice about accepting the invitation of a “friend of a friend, who said I could hang out at his place. I could sleep in his bed, and he would sleep on the couch.” But in the middle of the night, he entered the bedroom and raped her.

“He was aware of what he was doing,” said Folan, whose voice was unsteady as she recalled the “shock” that followed the attack. She wanted to “bury” the violation deep in her mind and just move on with her college life, finding solace in prayer and close friendships. At the same time, Folan did not discuss the assault with anyone, and, even today, she is not comfortable focusing for long on what happened and how she felt.

Within months after that awful night, however, she began to feel nauseous. A positive pregnancy test forced her to confront the fact that she was pregnant, and she would need to make plans that would decide the future of her unborn child. From the beginning, this pro-life Catholic never considered an abortion. “I knew that God entrusted this child's life to me, and I already loved him,” she said quietly.

Folan was also “99% certain” that adoption would be her best choice. “My mother was adopted, and we met her birth mother and her seven siblings when I was 8 years old. I thought it was cool, and it gave me a comfort level with adoption,” she said.

With her parent's support, Folan took a leave of absence from college, moved back home to Spokane, Washington, and began to research adoption options. Settling on an open adoption, she thought about the kind of parents she wanted for her child. “When I first started looking at families, I didn't care what religion they were. Then I realized that I wanted my child to know Jesus. And, finally, I realized that they had to be a Catholic pro-life family willing to fight for life.”

That decision started her on a path that took many twists and turns, with several leads going nowhere. She reconsidered parenting her son alone, but concluded that he needed a father. A nurse who was helping her called with the name of a pro-life Catholic couple in Maryland, Barry and Liz Sullivan, who already had one adopted child. The Sullivans wrote letters and sent pictures. And a Catholic priest, who was also helping her locate a family, also brought up the Sullivans, having heard about them from other contacts.

“God had a plan,” said Folan, noting that it quickly became clear that the Sullivans shared her values about family life. Folan thought Barry and Liz should name her son, but still did her own research at a Catholic bookstore, and one name “leapt out” immediately, she said: “Nathan,” which means “gift from God.”

She decided to say nothing, for fear they would feel obligated to comply with her choice. But when the Sullivans shared their own list, Liz told her, “We are trying to decide between Jason and Nathan.” Folan told them about her own experience, and they quickly replied, “Then Nathan it is.” Thinking back on that special moment, Folan concluded: “God calls each of us by name from the womb, as the Bible says. And I do believe that God did name him.”

Twenty-one days after her due date, Folan was scheduled for an induction, and she cried as she headed to the hospital: “I had to say goodbye.” Following 36 hours of labor, her son was delivered, and she had

six precious days with Nathan. On the fourth day, he was baptized with the Sullivans, her family, her grandparents and other relatives in attendance. "Barry, Liz and I were the parents, and my parents were the godparents. It was beautiful," Folan said.

After the baptism, they had a "handing over" ceremony, where Barry welcomed everyone and extended an invitation for them to visit and send letters. "During the ceremony, I placed Nathan in Liz's arms, and then she handed him back to me," Folan said. "I sensed that she realized the sacrifice I was making and wanted me to have him for the remaining time." Two days later, "I said goodbye to Nathan."

After returning to college, Folan kept the tumultuous events of the past year to herself. And, at times, she felt emotionally whipsawed as she began to question her decision to allow another family to raise Nathan. Ten months after his birth, the Sullivans "begged me to come and visit them in Maryland," she recalled. "And as soon as I walked into their house and saw him with his dad, mom and sister in their home, living the life I could not give him, I knew I had made the right decision."

Meanwhile, one of Folan's philosophy professors could see she was in "trouble, and he convinced me not to harbor that secret for the rest of my life, and be a pro-life presence on campus." She took that guidance to heart. And as she shared her own experience in ways that offered solace and hope to other women facing similar difficulties, she slowly experienced a deep healing in her own wounded heart.

Over the years, the Sullivans kept their promise to remain in regular touch with Folan. Through cards and phone calls, they shared Nathan's progress into adulthood, including his Eagle Scout badge and his success as a software engineer (not computer programmer).

By then, Folan was married with three children and worked as the director of family and youth ministries at St. Dominic's Catholic Church in San Francisco. When Nathan moved for a technology job to Silicon Valley, he spent time with Folan and her family, forging a strong bond with his younger half-siblings. He has also appeared with her at the annual Walk for Life in San Francisco. By then, Folan's painful second thoughts had long receded. "I know what grace is because I was surrounded by grace and found peace," she said. "Nathan has been such a blessing to my whole family."

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