

Widow Spends Day Comforting Strangers, Family and Friends

She Attends Mass, Telling Two Sons to Serve as Altar Boys, Then Joins the Mourners in St. Patrick's

By CHARLOTTE CURTIS

Mrs. Robert F. Kennedy, the widow of the slain Senator, spent yesterday comforting strangers, her family and her friends.

"She doesn't cry," said a close friend who was with her in the family's apartment overlooking the United Nations.

"She's made it better for all of us."

And so she had. Starting before 9 A.M., when friends began streaming through her doors, Ethel Skakel Kennedy was ministering to others, reaching out a hand to touch those who looked as if they needed assistance.

Those early hours were especially trying for her. At least one of her three older children, Joseph 3d, Robert Jr. or Kathleen, was in tears. Yet she had a wan smile for visitors, and hot coffee and breakfast rolls for anyone who wanted them.

She kept to what apparently was a well-planned if hectic schedule. At 11 A.M., she appeared on the sidewalk in front of her building, at 870 United Nations Plaza, ready for the private mass at Holy Family Church around the corner. Pope Paul worshipped at Holy Family during his visit here in 1965.

Dressed in Black

She wore a black silk dress, black shoes, black stockings and a simple black ribbon in the back of her freshly combed blond hair, and she carried a black handbag. Her sons were on either side of her. They were joined by about 15 other relatives and friends.

It was a short walk along almost deserted streets on a very hot day, and she moved briskly until four Army sergeants approached her and asked to join the group. Typically, Mrs. Kennedy went to them immediately, embracing and being embraced by Sgt. Maj. Francis Ruddy, who placed the wreath on President Kennedy's grave in November, 1963.

Inside the church on 47th Street between First and Second Avenues, Mrs. Kennedy appointed her two sons as altar

boys for the low requiem mass, which was attended by most of the Kennedy family. Msgr. Timothy J. Flynn, pastor of the church, was impressed by her composure.

He said later that when the matter of the altar boys came up, "She just pointed at two of the youngsters and told them to serve."

Go to St. Patrick's

After the service, Mrs. Kennedy and her children were driven to St. Patrick's Cathedral, where they joined with the thousands of mourners who had come to pay final respects to the dead Senator. She led her children into pew seats beside the bier.

Mrs. Kennedy crossed herself, then sat, as if transfixed, her eyes staring at the closed coffin. She and the children bowed their heads for a few moments and rose to stand beside the coffin.

Still staring at the coffin, her face impassive, she reached out her hand, touched the shiny mahogany gently and was gone.

Mrs. Kennedy's afternoon was equally demanding. From the cathedral, she and other members of the Kennedy family went to Mr. and Mrs. C. Douglas Dillon's uptown apartment for lunch. Mr. Dillon was Secretary of the Treasury during President John F. Kennedy's Administration.

And then finally, at about 5:20 P.M., Mrs. Kennedy was at last back at her apartment, where there were many voices, and none of them particularly hushed. She looked exhausted. She carried her hairbow in her hand. And yet she found the energy to kiss Donnie Radcliffe, a reporter for The Washington Star, on the cheek.

"It has been this way all along," said a friend who had traveled with Mrs. Kennedy on the plane from Los Angeles. "She was never worried about herself. She kept walking up and down the aisle, making sure everyone had blankets or pillows. She said they'd been up all night and they needed rest."