

A Short Story – The Dying Teach
by Deacon Gerry Palermo

Thus he made atonement for the dead that they might be freed from this sin. (2 Macc 12:46)

It was good to be back at the VA for the day. I missed my fellow veterans. Taking the patient resident list of 60 Catholics I did a sick call visit to each. Most, but not all, received Holy Communion. All received blessings and the honor of their dignity and autonomy.

Some are healing well and it was a joy to see their progress. “Where is Joe?” “Oh, he went home.” “You look like you are ready to leave too!” “Yes! Soon as I can ADL” “Wonderful!”

Some continue their decline. Yet even in decline when a soldier receives near daily Holy Communion there is a sort of transfiguration, a change that flows out from the interior. “Jimmy, wow, they gave you a nice electric wheelchair!” “Yes, and it’s fast too! I had to practice a lot before I became a danger to the entire floor!”

Others want validation. We talk about the stories of their service. These stories have a sacredness within them that does not allow repeating. But none would mind that I relay that in each story is the victory of a good decision, the regret of bad decisions, and a factoring out of motivations. When you are sick and declining there is additional time to make right what is wrong. “Father Major is not here today, for now, would you like to do an act of contrition? You can confess to Father Major when he gets back.”

The best stories are the discovery of the virtue of the others of their life. Veterans tend to honor those who helped them form as men/women and as a soldier. For most, these are the now beloved dead. Drill sergeants, platoon members, captains, nurses, doctors, spouses, children, and chaplains. For these people who took the time with them to inform and reform their thinking and behaviors. These are the deepest and most cherished and sometimes painful memories. These are the ones that need expression. “Is he still alive?” “No, he died many years ago” “Let us pray in supplication. Lord, we pray that whatever sinful deed they committed might be fully blotted out by Thy mercy. Eternal Rest grant unto them, O Lord, and may the perpetual light shine upon them. May his/her soul and the souls of all the faithfully departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.”

Residents very close to death require the greatest of all receptivity. What do they need most? Is there spiritual distress? How is the family having gathered here now? The sacredness of the family is in full display. A minister must have the greatest care in the use of words and actions most of all an absolute passivity before God who is present with his child lying there. The patient guides you. The spouse guides you. The Holy Spirit guides you. Sacred silence fills the room. Then, when all is ready, ‘Let us pray’. We celebrate Viaticum.

Between sick calls I took an informal meeting with the Rabbi in charge of some specialty wards. It was a warm discussion about current census and of the improvements coming in the facility. Wonderful changes ahead - thanks be to God.

I had a meeting in basement where the volunteer office is located. After the meeting I was walking down the hallway and ready to turn to the elevator hall. But I stopped. I could see them from a far distance. This basement hallway is at least ½ mile long. It's the length of the entire complex. But I knew. I could see and hear the procession. I can hear the singing bowl. I can see the flag and the procession behind. So I waited.

In an interfaith practice, and for all processions of a fallen veteran, we adopt the Buddhist practice of the singing bowl. It is used as a signal of the procession of the Honor Walk. All employees, volunteers and especially Chaplains, stand at attention and allow the Honor Walk to take the focus and, as a fellow veteran, I stand and salute my fallen comrade. The singing bowl, the casket draped in the flag, the family and ministers process. All Airmen, Marines, Seamen and Soldiers receive the honor and all Airmen, Marines, Seamen and Soldiers render the honor.

Elected civilian leaders who are not veterans place their hand over their heart.

This is a moment of brothers in arms and our nakedness before God. Remember not the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions: according to thy mercy remember thou me for thy goodness' sake, O LORD.

It was good to be back today and to share memories with the young who need to be formed.

Peace be with you.

Deacon Gerry

Disclaimer – Names, times and places are fictional or obscured to protect the privacy of others without distorting the essential truth of the encounter.

References:

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