

Traveling Companion: Say the things you need to say

Fr. Michael Tracey

On Sunday night, I was sitting in my recliner, relaxing after a busy day and reading a book, when the phone rang. Someone was dying in a nursing home about ten miles away and the family needed a priest to come and give him the Sacrament of the Sick.

I arrived and met the family in the patient's room. They were gathered around his bed with some neighbors and friends who were there to support them.

Following some brief introductions, I began the rite of Anointing. The family joined in with the prayers and responses. Peter, in his mid seventies, lay in bed, gasping for breath, even with the aid of an oxygen mask. We concluded the anointing and waited.

His wife eased herself in by the right side of his bed and hunkered down to be close to him. She took turns stroking his withered hand and his wrinkled forehead, taking turns also to brush his thinning, gray hair. She watched and listened to his breathing. We all knew that the end was close.

We asked her to get close to Peter's ear and tell him the things she always wanted to tell him and needed to tell him now. She gently whispered her love, pausing momentarily to wipe away a tear that trickled down her own cheek. We watched her and especially Peter's eyes flicker as if he was responding affirmatively to her sharings.

She also told him that she would be okay, not to worry about her; that it was okay for him to leave, to go home.

She pulled back when he had finished but continued to stroke his forehead and outstretched hand. She looked in our direction as if asking, "Did I do it right?" Instinctively, everyone nodded their approval.

A short time later, Peter took a few, belabored breaths. Again, we looked at each other. It was obvious. With a sigh, he breathed his last. His wife watched, realizing human life was no more.

We called the nurse. She arrived, looked for a pulse, and then looked for blood pressure. As she raised her eyes, she caught the wife's eyes and just nodded to her. The wife burst out in tears.

Silence followed, disturbed only by the sobs of her tears. When the tears subsided momentarily, we told her that she did the right thing. We reminded her that her husband had waited for the Anointing of the Sick, the assurance that all sins were forgiven and he would be at peace and more especially, he waited to hear his wife say the things she needed to say and him hear so that he could continue his eternal journey.

She asked to be alone with her husband so we moved out into the corridor and gave her some private moments.

On my return trip home down the highway, I thought about the experience. I felt privileged to witness such a moving exchange between husband and wife; to see a wife seize the opportunity to tell her husband the things she needed to tell and he needed to hear before he passed on.

I wondered how often we miss such precious opportunities to do the things we need to do and to say the things we need to say, both to family, friend and even stranger. I wondered how often we catch ourselves saying things like, "If only..." or "I wish I had..." or "I should have..."

I realized how blessed I was to be in Peter's room that night and to witness the exchange between husband and wife. I also realized that I needed to share that experience with my readers, hoping that it will challenge them to say the things they need to say and do the things they need to do, NOW!