

## **Traveling Companion: Earth gives us sorrows...**

### **Fr. Michael Tracey**

The call came on Sunday morning at 8:00 a.m. to go to a house and administer the Sacrament of the Sick to an elderly gentleman who was dying. The directions were clear. I was given the house number and told that a red van would be parked in the driveway. It was and I found the house easily.

One of his daughters ushered me into the house, up a few steps and into a make-shift bedroom. The elderly gentleman lay in the hospital bed just inside the door. A large couch covered with a light green bedspread rested beside the bed. To the right of the bed, I noticed a make-shift army type cot with a pillow and some sheets. It was obvious, people were keeping vigil at the bedside of the elderly gentleman.

A middle-aged woman, slightly built with brunette, straight hair, introduced herself as the gentleman's daughter. She told me that he had asked for a priest earlier that morning because he wanted to make his peace with his Maker.

I proceeded to anoint the gentleman as he gasped for air erratically. His eyes were closed behind his silver glasses that hung awkwardly on his face. The two women, both daughters, joined in the prayers during the anointing.

Following the anointing, I stood around with the women and they filled in some of the details. Their father, retired from the service, had stomach cancer and, two months earlier, was discharged from the hospital, after being told that, at most, he had two months to live because the cancer had spread even before they could get it all through surgery.

The daughters told me about how hospice had continued to help but advised them that the end was near. As I listened to the daughters, I discovered many things about the family. The gentleman had thirteen children. Like many families, they had their disagreements and had often not talked to each other because of ill feelings between them. Now, seeing their father's immanent death, one by one, they gathered to make their peace with him and with each other.

The daughters told me that their father's cancer and immanent death, had provided them with an opportunity for reconciliation and getting their own lives right with God. They also told me that their father had fallen away from the church for years and that, earlier that morning, he had asked for a priest to come so that he might be at peace in his own death.

Listening to the women sharing, I glanced around the room to see what hung on the walls. I noticed various family pictures, some Japanese style paintings, some awards. Looking around a room, one can get a glimpse of what is important to a family and the decorum in that room spoke volumes to me of this family.

My eye caught some signs that were hand-scripted just over the head of their father's bed. One sign in particular spoke to me. Just below a sign that said, "Welcome home Dad! We missed you!" The sign that caught my eye said, "Earth gives us sorrows that only heaven can heal." At the bottom, it was attributed to the great English martyr, Thomas More.

Immediately, I thought of the funeral I had performed a few days earlier. A young thirty-three year old woman, on her way to visit with and reconcile with her husband was killed in a tragic accident.

In one case, I realized reconciliation had begun; in another case, it had been realized.

I hoped that the "valley of tears" would be replaced by a "mountain of hope." I also knew that heaven had already healed the sorrows in this family even before cancer could unleash its final blow.