

Traveling Companion: Offer it up -

Fr. Michael Tracey

One of the hospice agencies called me the other day to go and visit a couple. The husband was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and had just started the chemotherapy routine. The hospice agency had warned me about his demur and that he might not be that receptive to a visit of a priest.

I had called ahead to find out the best time for a visit. I arrived and was ushered into a spacious living room, dining room, kitchen combination. Dan sat in a recliner clad in a white t-shirt, a light tan pants and bare feet. His bald head was either genetic or as a result of the chemotherapy.

Not sure what to expect, I gingerly started some small talk; talk about where they were from originally; the effect of the hurricane and the task of rebuilding their home following the hurricane. They indicated that they had been married for forty-three years and had grown children who were scattered around Mississippi and Florida.

"You know he has been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer," Betty exclaimed. Her statement allowed an opening to approach the subject of his cancer and any feelings, questions or hostilities he might have.

He began to talk about the diagnosis; the chemotherapy treatments he already had received as well as his attitude. I sensed he was still trying to figure me out as he engaged in a limited sharing.

Betty, his wife, interjected some comments to keep the conversation going. Comments, like, "What are we going to do? We have been together for so long. What am I going to do without him. He has been so active. He has done all the outside work and I have taken care of the inside." Dan just kept listening to and watching her while she spoke. Occasionally, he broke out in a smile.

"We need to get our lives right with God. We need to start going back to church again. We used to love Fr... in New Orleans when he was our pastor. He came and blessed our first home and often came to eat with us. I wonder where he is now."

Finally, she spurted out the crux of what she was wrestling with since her husband discovered he had cancer. She stated, "Why do we have to suffer? Why can we not just die peacefully without having to suffer?" Obviously, she had in mind her husband whose pain was eased with morphine patches in between chemotherapy sessions.

I remembered as a kid when we would complain about chores we had to do, or even burdens we had to carry, being told to "offer it up." Often the advice was peppered with a cause. We were told to "offer it up for the poor souls in Purgatory." As kids, we thought there must have been a huge array of souls in Purgatory. Still, we hoped that our "offering it up," would do some good for the poor souls.

Initially, we rebelled against what seemed a simplistic approach. But, on reflection, the suggestion had its merits. Suffering was seen, not as a personal burden or chore, but as a redemptive act, done for someone else. By "offering it up" for someone else, we were allowing our struggle or suffering to have a meaning, purpose and opportunity beyond us.

After all, Jesus' suffering and death on the cross had a purpose because it was an offering on behalf of humankind. It fulfilled its purpose through resurrection and the redemption of humanity.

So, maybe, the next time I begin to cry on someone's shoulder and they advise me to "offer it up," I will accept their advice, not as something simplistic, but as a redemptive opportunity.