

Impact

I concelebrated a Mass for healing recently in the parish next door. The celebrant was a priest in his mid-eighties and formerly a native of the area. What made this Mass different was not that it was a Mass of healing for people in the community who were sick. But, it was a Mass of healing for a particular person who was a member of the parish for almost twenty years. He was a sixty-nine year old man who, four months earlier, had quadruple heart bypass and just recently found out that he had stomach cancer. The church was packed with people. Extra chairs had to be laid out to accommodate the crowd. The local choir chanted out the familiar hymns that enhanced the celebration. Ten altar servers graced the steps of the marble altar, making way for the main celebrant and myself. Oh, yes! The Mass was a Mass of healing for the parish pastor.

As I glanced around the crowd, standing shoulder to shoulder, I realized two things: one how well respected their pastor is and secondly, how sad that sometimes, it takes sickness or often tragedy for many to show their solidarity and appreciation.

The week before the Mass, their pastor wrote a letter to his parishioners. He asked them to pray for him; to give him time and the privacy to process and come to terms with the cruel cross of cancer that was thrust upon him now.

As priests, so much of our lives are lived in the public eye, under the gaze of watchful eyes. We project a public persona, so often encased in a clerical mask that hides our human face. Sometimes, due to the pressure of presumptions, the expectations of everyone; the need to have all the answers; our being straight-jacketed into conformity, our masks crumble and our human face shatters the mask.

Someone says the wrong thing at the wrong time. Someone else shows up at the wrong time. Someone else tests your patience or questions your motives or integrity at a meeting. The walls shatter; the demeanour changes; seething resentment begins to percolate within. Alone and in his own inner sanctum, the priest tries to rationalize. Alone, he sits, stew, often resenting, often questioning. In the darkness and confusion within, he doesn't have a spouse who will allow him to unleash his pent up feelings. Without a comforting ear to listen; a supporting touch; it become so easy to allow whatever caused the heartache and crushed spirit to multiply and magnify during the long dark night alone.

Often, in the inner sanctum of his life, the priest sheds his own silent tears from the weight of the cross of having to be right all the time, for having to be perfect, for having to have all the answers; to be both a people pleaser and solver; a person who must fly under the radar of church authorities or be subject to zero tolerance.

Of course, he enjoys his work as a priest. After all, he is an instrument of God's power; a healer of hearts and souls; a bridge builder between heaven and earth; a meeting place for all human emotions and struggles; a trouble-shooter through complex relationships; a signpost to a land beyond.

Above all, he is not only a healer but a wounded healer. Many don't see his personal crown of thorns or his wounded side. He is so careful to hide them deep within and so the clerical mask is donned once again because of expectations rather than reality; because of perceptions rather than the curse of being human.

A Mass of healing, such as the one I concelebrated, brings all of us to our knees, challenging us to make a deeper examination of conscience; to see and accept our flawed human nature; to shred to pieces our masks of conformity; to recognize that we are all wounded and in need of healing. In our day, he is not only an endangered species but also is a member of flawed but redeemed human race.

(On November 24th, 2017 – Black Friday – one week following the Mass of healing – Fr. Jackie Conroy died)