

I'm ready!

Following Catherine's funeral Mass, we went to the cemetery. It was a beautiful spring day with a gentle breeze to caress minds, hearts and faces. I noticed as the pallbearers brought the casket to its final resting place, others brought a large blue and white ice chest. My curiosity was soon satisfied. When I finished the final commendation prayers, some roses were passed out among the young ladies – presumably nieces. Then the ice chest was opened and some plastic cups were passed around. Then a bottle of uncorked white wine was passed around. Everyone poured some and raised their glasses in a toast to Catherine. I was offered one but did not indulge because I am a teetotaler.

I had promised another family that I would go and see their father when I had finished the funeral. Some weeks earlier, I had given him the Anointing of the Sick in Gulfport Memorial Hospital. His family brought him home to die in his own home. He wanted to talk to me

When I arrived at his house in the countryside, I saw his hospital bed in the middle of the living room floor. The family sat around watching and waiting. Gerry was asleep so one of his daughters aroused him and told him that I was there to see him.

His daughter asked him if he wanted to talk with me alone. He said yes and gradually everyone went outside. Gerry reached out his hand and I held it. He still had the hospital ID on as well as indications of medicines he was allergic to.

For the next thirty minutes, I sat by his bedside and listened. He began by saying, "I'm ready! I don't know why God isn't taking me. I want this pain to be over. People keep telling me that I am looking great. If they only knew how I felt on the inside with this pain, they wouldn't say that."

He continued talking about the doctors and his prognosis. "The doctors gave me three to four weeks to live. I spent three weeks in the hospital. So, I probably have another week to live." I tried to tell him that doctors are not God; that we do not control our coming into the world or our leaving it. "But, I'm ready. Why isn't God taking me?" he continued.

"I can't believe how all this happened. One day I was feeling great and the next day I was in the hospital being told that I had three or four weeks to live. I don't understand it." I tried to assure him that there are lots of things we will never understand and may never; that such is controlled by someone much greater than any of us.

"I remember sitting in church after I broke my shoulder and I thought that was painful. That was nothing compared to what I am suffering now."

Then he went on to tell me of another incident in his life. "I remember lying in a ditch with two bullets in me and praying that I would die." He volunteered that such happened to him in the Korean War. "Two Chinese soldiers came along and rescued me," he concluded.

He went on to talk about his recent conversations with his children. "I talked with my son and told him that I loved him and that we had some good times and bad times together but that the good times far outweighed the bad times. My son told me he didn't want me to leave." I assured him how natural this was in that we don't want to let go of the people we love.

He kept coming back to the idea that he was ready to die and still wondered why God wasn't answering his prayer. He asked if it was okay to ask to die. I assured him. We also spoke of how Jesus had his own struggle with death; how he cried out from the cross, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?" some time later, he was able to say, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Gerry seemed to understand the point I was trying to make.

I sensed that he was tiring as his eyes began to close more frequently. He indicated he was getting tired. I asked if it would be okay to pray with him. We did. He held my hand tightly and thanked me for coming. One of his final words were, "You will be reading out my name in church before long." I knew what he meant.

On the way home, I reflected on both experiences and thanked the Lord for the opportunity to have the privilege of being part of the special, grace-filled moments in people's lives.

(Gerry's prayer was answered. He died two days later)