



Sitting on the Edge of the Bed

There are people who, like Jesus, do things that go beyond their own self-interest. **Kevin O'Rourke SJ**, assistant director of novices at the Jesuit novitiate in Birmingham, reflects on those people, from janitors to senators, who follow in Jesus' footsteps.



Up early every morning, breakfast left ready for James and the children. An early bus into town, and Marie would check in at the hospital at six thirty. Bucket, brush, mop and rubber gloves, she had two floors to clean, including bathrooms and toilets. Not the most pleasant of work, you might say. Week in week out. A warm heart, a listening ear, a kind word, a genuine person.

The day came when her supervisor called her to the office. I wonder what that's about, she thought. It was a pleasant encounter. 'You're one of my best. I have to make some changes, and I thought you should get first choice.'

Her supervisor was well aware that Marie's work was neither pleasant nor easy, with early starts and places to clean where many would not choose to go. 'I need a new staff member for the canteen. The hours are more sociable, and the work is more pleasant. I think you deserve a break.

Would you like to take it on?'

Marie took a few deep breaths and thought it over for a while. 'No, I think I'll stay where I am, but thanks for thinking of me.' The supervisor was taken aback. Marie explained.

In the course of her day's work, she would meet many women patients. Lonely, away from home, missing their families, anxious about their health, they had a lot on their minds. A kind word or a friendly greeting, and it would all come out. 'I just put down my mop and bucket, sit on the edge of the bed, and listen. I have little enough to say, but I know they feel a little better when we part. If I move to the canteen, the person who replaces me mightn't want to do that.'

We don't hear much about people like Marie. Never in the headlines,



certainly not considered celebrities. People like her make big institutions human. We meet them all the time. The bus driver, the person at the checkout, the hospital porter. They brighten our day, lift our spirits. They keep us grounded, reminding us of what is really important.

John McCain was an American politician who had been imprisoned in Vietnam and subjected to severe torture. He was offered release when his captors learned that he was well connected at home. He refused the offer, not wanting privilege, and decided to remain with the men in his army company. In later years, he was invited to give a graduation address at a university. Among other things, he said 'When you are making decisions about your future, think

about doing something that goes beyond your own self-interest'. I am sure that, being a man of such integrity, he was taken seriously by at least some of his young listeners.

People like Marie do things beyond their own self-interest. They are generous, go the extra mile, make the sacrifices, think of others, expect nothing in return. What makes them like that? Is it nature or nurture, grace or good fortune? Through Baptism Christ is present in each person. His Spirit is given to us to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Lk 4:18–19).

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Marie was doing just that. 