

Spiritual Accompaniment of the Sick

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I have worked as a healthcare chaplain for fifteen years now, and many times over these years I have heard, 'You must be used to this now', 'I am sure you have seen all this before many times', or 'You probably take no notice of death or sickness anymore.' When challenged by the curiosity of people pained by their own illness or that of a loved one with questions like this, I try to answer with as much honesty, compassion, courage and congruence as I can. I try to be reflective of my own experience of accompanying the sick and the dying, sharing my experience truthfully and authentically.

In truth, I do not have the same degree of fear and reluctance as I once had as a naive, young chaplain. It is no lie when I say that I have grown more comfortable in the space of other people's discomfort. I am less challenged by awkward silences, expressions of pain or indeed the

many enigmatic questions that illness and mortality can bring. Neither is it misleading to reflect that I now stand with greater certainty than those days when I wanted to run away, to dash rapidly away from the pain and the agony of the human condition. I have developed an ability to hold my ground, to hold space, to expect the unexpected.

I must also be clear that this ability to stay with the pain of others, to listen compassionately and to communicate empathy and solace, to offer my presence and not the existential myopia that Pope Francis has cautioned against in *Let us Dream*, is not a message of desensitisation or a cold response borne out of routine or familiarity. It is in no way to be read as a minimisation of the pain of another person. In contrast, it is quite the opposite. The pain and suffering of others has helped me to open my heart in more ways than one. It has helped me to value the health and well-being I have myself. It has given me an enhanced value for life and the people in mine. It has assisted me to live more effectively in the moment and to *carpe diem* with more energy and enthusiasm. Above all, however, it has shown me that this accompaniment of the sick and the dying is not my work, but rather that

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I have a deep faith but one which has been challenged many times – rocked by the trajectory of my life and of those I care for. So too has it been consolidated by the awareness that I am never alone. That God walks the earth every day with me, accompanies me as I stumble and fall through the pathway of my life. He shows up for me in countless ways and in a multitude of people every day of my life.

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Therefore my courage, my

strength, my ability to minister to others comes not from familiarity, arrogance or routine. It comes not from feeling disconnected or distanced from the people I serve. There is no desensitisation or carelessness towards the sick and the dying. What there is quite simply is the love and support of my God. I can minister only because he is my friend, my companion, my guide. He is the jewel in the crown, my ever-present companion. God is the one who holds my hand, understands my weaknesses, carries me when I struggle to carry myself; he gives me hope when I have none of my own. I walk humbly each day with my God so that, somehow, I can walk even more humbly with you.