

Caring is a Promise

Recently I met a friend who was concerned about the unexpected illness of his wife of forty years. "It came upon us pretty quick!" he exclaimed. "And there has been a lot of back and forth to the hospital for tests - maybe cancer - maybe surgery." As I looked into his eyes and saw the trembling of his lip, I detected a hodgepodge of emotions: fear, distress, deep love and concern, helplessness. "What can we do? What can we do?" he repeated it, "Only hope for the best".

When I mentioned that I would pray for both of them, he reached out his hand to me and straightened his stooped shoulders and thanked me by saying "Yes, please pray." I could tell he meant it and wanted to rely on these prayers. On my part, it was the least I could do. And I meant it too, that I would pray that is!

When Pope John Paul II instituted the *World Day of the Sick* he encouraged those who are ill, and their families and friend, to reflect on the Christian meaning of suffering. He understood that, at the very heart of the Gospel, was a message of healing. Jesus brought the kind of healing that was administered by his touch and by his words. When Jesus healed it was never magical or distant; never merely clinical. There was something engaging and personal about each of these healing encounters. It wasn't an act done in isolation, on the contrary, it was a human activity embodied in the life of the community. For that reason, it should come as no surprise that the Church has been at the forefront of providing health care services, and that spiritual and religious care has been a hallmark of the ministry of these organizations, as well as central to parish life.

World Day of the Sick is more than a celebration, it is an act of faith in the healing ministry of the whole Church: those who are sick, family members, health care professionals, pastors and parishioners. The hope and confidence that is engendered in those who are sick comes, not only from a desire for a cure, but from the assurance that even in sickness they will not be alone. If the healing ministry means anything, it is a promise that no person will suffer alone. Such a promise provides a focus for the Church's ministry of healing. It also challenge all Christians to stand by those who are affected by illness.

When I mentioned to my friend that I would pray for he and his wife during her illness, I knew it would mean more than this. I knew that it might also mean some visits to the hospital, that my wife and I would make a few meals for them to tide them over, that we would stop over and check on him while his wife was in the hospital, and that we would notify the parish pastoral care team. It could also mean becoming involved as a volunteer in that very parish pastoral care team. It could also mean becoming more vigilant to advocate for the needs of those who are more at risk and vulnerable.

As Christians celebrate *World Day of the Sick* we pray for those who are sick and those who care for them. We seek to reach out to them in formal and informal ways so that no one will suffer alone. We promise this with confidence and hope.

A reflection by
Greg J. Humbert

