

## SERVING US UNTIL OUR DYING BREATH

by Robert Zagore

When I was in my second year at seminary, a couple of friends asked me if I would help start an overnight chaplaincy program at a local inner city hospital. I thought of it as a great opportunity for mission work. The 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. hours would guarantee time to study, even sleep. I just had to be on site. The nurses would call if there was a crisis. I'd run in, proclaim God's Word, and allow the healing balm of the Gospel to bring relief -- or so I thought.

My vision of meaningful, humorous, reasoned, dialogues with the distressed and dying was soon demolished. On my first night I received a call: "Code Blue". I ran down to the proper hospital wing and looked for the room. The bustle told me which it was. I stood in the doorway. The doctors and nurses worked furiously to revive an elderly man. I had decided to stand in the door, but a nurse grabbed me by the arm and moved me to the head of the bed. "We've been waiting for you," she announced.

I was speechless and overwhelmed. The sights and sounds flooded my senses. I had never seen someone dying before. I searched my brain for an appropriate response. I placed my hand on the man's head, and said the only words which would come into my mind, "Our Father, who art in heaven..." As I spoke, I noticed others were praying too. As the "Amen" rang out, I continued the pattern I learned from praying the "suffrages" in church. "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth...." Around the room, lips moved in unison. Only the occasional doctor's order broke the liturgy of the unscheduled evening prayer. The room was no longer the valley of the shadow of death. It was the gate of heaven, through which, that night, a righteous man passed. "You did a nice job, thanks," someone said. At the time, I wasn't sure what I had done.

Time passed, and my experience grew. I began to learn the importance of the Church's prayer. Before, I thought of it as a Lutheran family heirloom. The liturgy seemed to be like grandmother's china. It was set out for family gatherings and special occasions. It wasn't for everyday use. Besides, it was so old; no one except the family could appreciate its beauty.

I was wrong. During those months of overnight chaplaincy, I would often be called to attend those who were in shock, unconscious, near death, critically injured. I was called in to speak to families during devastating trials. The work was always easier if they knew the liturgy -- and surprisingly many did. For some, the words were only the vague shadows from a childhood ritual. But they still were true. With others, I saw the time-ripened fruit of an ongoing relationship with God. I didn't have to teach them the words. They didn't have to struggle through their tears to understand. They knew the words, and the words brought hope. Christ crashed through their darkness and pain. They weren't alone.

In the emergency room one night, a nurse watched as a family gathered around their stricken father. I had learned to ask if they went to Church and where. With the answer, I knew how to proceed. "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." "Amen," "Lord have mercy..." "Our Father..." Christ was there in the words they had spoken with Him since childhood. The Church was there, as they spoke the same words they learned in the pew. I told the nurse what it meant. "I thought the room seemed crowded." she said, smiling. She was in Church the next Sunday, joining her prayer to theirs.

The scene was always much different with unbelievers. False hopes and worldly goals are little comfort when facing death or grave trauma. God's Word still brought hope, even created faith. But a deathbed is a hard place to teach the faith. It is much better learned day by day, week by week. In this way, the words of the liturgy make incremental deposits in our hearts and minds from which the fruits of hope are drawn in times of trial. The structure and timeless nature of the Church's worship calls order out of the chaos of a crisis. It perfectly provides pastoral care at the end of life, because the peace and hope it gives have been accruing for a lifetime. It is familiar, easily recalled, and theologically solid. The words revive a thousand moments in the presence of a merciful and loving Father, and bring us there again.

In the parish, I have found that this same truth holds. I have been the pastor of an Alzheimer's patient who struggled to remember even her daughter's name. But she could speak every word of the Divine Service. I witnessed her blessed relief as hope, faith, and peace-giving words broke through the hellish torment of a languishing mind. Christ had come to her. I was a gift from my predecessors. Because they had taught her the liturgy, she had the words to greet her God. When parishes cultivate a liturgical life, they arm their sons and daughters with words ingrained with the Gospel. They implant a resolute and joyous hope. Reinforced over a lifetime, they are unshakable, even by death. Recently, a dear saint died. For thirty years she faithfully took her place behind the organ week after week. In her last decade, she couldn't leave her living room chair. During visits she recalled the Church with the coal-fired stove, and a foot-pumped organ, that graced the German settlement. The prayers and litany we spoke, and sometimes sang, she had learned as a girl. We prayed them through continued illness. We spoke them through tears when her only son was murdered. When I last saw her, she was in the hospital bed she would not leave alive. The last words I spoke to her were 3400 years older than she. Through three and a half millennia, these words had given what they promised. For nearly a century, they were the words with which her pastors had blessed her. "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace."

She knew He would. The last word I heard her say, I overheard her say to God: "Amen".