

Third Easter Sunday042620

THEY RECOGNIZED CHRIST IN THE STRANGER

On Friday afternoon I received permission from a Nursing Home to come visit one of our elderly parishioners and provide the anointing of the sick. Not a local Nursing Home. During my half hour in that room, this gentleman was in a shared room with the curtain drawn between his bed and his neighbor's, a couple of things happened that were striking and unusual. I visited with this elderly gentleman and he was grateful for the visit. He did most of the talking. After about fifteen minutes I told Him I was going to anoint him. He had only to listen to the prayers. At the moment when I placed my hands on his head to pray in silence, something happened I had never experienced before. Usually I pray silently for forty-five seconds or a minute, asking for healing of whatever in the person was most in need of healing.

Instead, as soon as I placed my hands on his forehead, he began to speak. To pray actually. "Lord, please bless Msgr. McHenry. Thank him for being a good priest and a good pastor. Bless him Lord with good health and may he serve for many more years." It was this wonderful prayer that flowed right out of him. I have never experienced anything like that before. He broke into prayer for me! A kind of reverse anointing. As if I was the one receiving the healing. And then in a flash I realized that the Lord was in this. It moved me very deeply. Like those two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They knew Jesus. They loved Jesus. He was right there but they did not recognize Jesus. My friends, I submit to you this kind of thing actually is happening all the time. I was in the room with this gentleman but Our Lord was there with us although at first we did not realize it. But then we did.

When I finished a voice came from the other bed in the room. "Do you have some time for a classmate?" I was immediately puzzled. I stepped around the curtain and there in the bed was a priest classmate of mine. He was retired. He had had some major surgery and was recuperating in this Nursing Facility when the coronavirus broke out and now he was here until it was safe to return to his retirement home. We chitchatted and caught up on some things. He asked me if I would anoint him also which I was happy to do. After I put the olive oil on his forehead and hands a thought entered my mind from sixteen years ago when I was visiting with my best priest friend, Msgr. Tom Herron. One of the things he had said to me as he was dying of cancer was about what he missed most in his illness. He missed being able to be priest for people. To hear their confessions and anoint them or give them communion or visit them when they were sick. He missed being able to pray. At all. In that moment I turned to my classmate in the bed and I asked him if he would give me his priestly blessing. Which he did And once again it was two men on our own Emmaus journey but suddenly Our Lord was with us too although we had not recognized it before. I left that room filled with the experience of the presence of Jesus Christ. Right here. Right now. Never saw him. Never heard him. But definitely knew the Lord was there.

When I got home I was reading a Twitter post from a Conservative news commentator, Marc Thiessen. I read what he writes. I agree sometimes and disagree sometimes. But this day he posted a request for prayers. His 91-year old mom had come down with Covid-19 and was in very bad shape in the hospital. He does not usually put anything from his personal life in his tweets but after speaking with his wife she encouraged him. He simply tweeted out a request for prayers. Immediately he was blown away at the response. He was completely unprepared for what followed. He heard from thousands of people who reached out to him, offered him prayers for his mom. Even opponents and those who typically disagree with his viewpoint offered to pray. Only a very few got ugly and told him he deserved for her to get sick because of his political views. But even those were immediately shushed by others.

He wrote: “As a teenager, my mother fought with the Polish underground during the 1944 Warsaw Uprising against the Nazis. Through social media, word of her illness traveled across the Atlantic. The Warsaw Uprising Museum tweeted: “A hero of the Warsaw Uprising. We are thinking of you and hoping for her speedy recovery!” Suddenly, Polish Twitter swung into action, as prayers poured in from the Polish diaspora.

One [study](#) found that including strangers in your social network can hurt self-esteem. Maybe so, but this week my family was enveloped in the compassionate embrace of countless strangers. I tried to “like” every reply but eventually gave up. There were just too many. According to Twitter’s analytics, 2.6 million people saw my tweet and more than 254,000 engaged with it — reading, liking, responding or sharing it with others. There is no analytic to show how many stopped to pray, but if even a fraction did, then my family has been blessed beyond measure.

I believe in the power of prayer. When I worked in the Bush White House, my dear friend Monsignor Charles Pope gave a [homily](#) at the National Day of Prayer that has always stayed with me. “I’ve often thought that one of the joys of heaven will be that we’ll be able to see what a difference our prayers made,” he said that day. “I think in heaven we’ll see that we changed world history by our prayers working with God’s grace. ... We’re going to find out that hearts were changed, enemies were reconciled, communities were renewed and families were restored because we prayed.” He ended by quoting an old gospel song: “Somebody prayed for me. Had me on their mind, took the time and prayed for me. I’m so glad they prayed.” And then he said: To everyone praying for my mom: Thank you. I’m so glad you prayed.

My friends, I submit to you that the Lord was here too. That’s how it works. If you believe, you can see it. And once you begin to see it, everything changes. We are all on our own Emmaus walk, especially at this time. Let us pray for the grace of recognition and realization so that when the Lord does draw near, right into our ordinary lives, we can sense he is near.

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.