

A Category 5 Prayer, In Real Time

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Actually, all prayer should be in real time. However, when we gather for our weekly worship services in synagogue, church, mosque or other gathering space, we are less “we” and more “I.” Think of it. No one can see inside you and me, with our individual stories and experiences of the past week, day or hour. No one has taken the temperature of the individual and her or his feelings, whether joy, sorrow, worry, delight or even boredom. It is a wonder that prayer and ritual can speak to and from such diversity.

But the tempest of an approaching hurricane and an emergency evacuation of nearly 400 seniors from Bon Secours St. Petersburg, Florida, bound us in one common experience. Residents, staff, family and volunteers trekked an arduous, 10-mile journey toward safekeeping and higher ground amid a growing swirl of shared anxiety and fear. The 12-hour evacuation was only the beginning of five days of mattresses side by side on the floor, with the largest grouping of nearly 300 in a school gymnasium turned skilled nursing center.

I received a text requesting prayer early on Sunday morning, Day 3 of the five-day evacuation experience and hours away from Irma making landfall on what was now upgraded to a Category 5 hit on Florida’s west coast.

The text read: “Would you come to lead prayer (not Mass per se) in different areas to provide some comfort that would be great!”

In this moment, as I read the text, I am not the corporate leader in organizational spirituality, but a volunteer and a family member (my mother is a resident). More importantly, I have been called as priest, which at its core in Hebrew and Christian ritual is the mediating “pray-er” in the sanctuary behind the curtain or veil, as intercessory from the people to God.

I showered, dressed and drove to the evacuation site, all the while trying to imagine how to

respond to the request for prayer. I have to admit I first was drawn to the Scriptural story of Noah’s ark — what else? That is, until I read of God’s wrath coming in a promise of total destruction of every living thing on earth. No, that’s not comforting. I did realize there was the “good part” at the end, with a dove, an olive leaf, a rainbow and a covenant. But I did not think we had time for all that.

So I arrive with Scriptures but no prayer. I have been here every day since the evacuation, so I am familiar with the incredible commotion of caregivers miraculously tending residents on floor mattresses while directing the wheelchair-bound traffic clogging up the narrow thoroughfare.

I am hurried to the kitchen, where, I am told,

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the staff specifically requested a prayer. I see them through the doorway — at least 30 of them — in every stage of preparing and serving food. They are opening ovens, refilling platters, putting plates on trays, washing and rinsing dishes.

I carry the Scriptures, but no prayer.

I think, “What do they need, and in real time?” I think of the past few days when I had been helping with the evacuation, and my near-tears as I did whatever they told me — ostensibly wheeling residents, unloading trucks, pouring juice — but really I was witnessing, in real time, the incredible acts of God in history. A line comes to me: “No one has ever seen God,” and I think, “Isn’t that the first Letter of John?”

I open the Scriptures, and I can feel a prayer coming. The words are not formed yet, but the underlying spirit is in my own conviction, and I would even say contradiction, to that verse. Oh yeah, these residents have seen God.

I am introduced as offering a prayer. I see these busy people look up, and I hear the surprise of my own voice saying, “I have a one-minute prayer! Just one minute! Can we pause for just one minute?”

I remember the spray stopping from the faucet in the hand of the man in front of me. I remember how quiet it got. I remember heads bowing. I opened up the Scriptures and said my verse, though it was not really on the page I opened to. But I knew the context — “God is love, he or she who abides in love abides in God,” so I ad-lib that one too.

I close the Scriptures and bow my head and use simple words to say something like, “God, in every action and in every gesture and in everything these people do, our residents see you. Give them strength, and let them know you are here with them.”

I pause and quietly say “amen,” with probably a few seconds to spare. And everyone bellows “amen” and — catch this — they applaud! The spray faucet goes back on, the dishes rattle, the serving spoons are scooping, and I turn to leave.

My escort is nowhere to be found. I understand. Like everyone these days, you are pulled to the next need, and the next, and the next.

Well, I think to myself, I have a prayer. So I spend the next couple of hours walking the gymnasium and the classrooms, selling my wares:

“Want a one-minute prayer?” After the expected incredulous look, I give them a sort of money-back guarantee, “just one minute!” And I say the same words as at the kitchen staff gathering, though I did find the verse in I John, so now I am reading the Scripture in real time.

The prayer communities form in the geography of space and time. There is no rite of initiation, no recitation of a creed, no one name for the Divine. A nurse’s aide is giving medication to a resident, and before she leaves, I invite her and the

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resident, and then I grab the arm of a passerby, and we have our one-minute prayer.

Soon I hear residents behind me, or diagonally to the right and left: “Can you do that for me?” And staff stop, look and listen and then join the controversial “No one has ever seen God” Scriptural conversation-starter. And the prayer response is that if we stop, look and listen, we do see God in this place.

Isn’t that fundamentally the ministry formation question we ask our leaders, that distinguishes us as a ministry: “Where do you see God in this place?”

My afternoon of forming prayer communities was really an invitation for our front-line staff to awaken to the same question: “Where are you seeing God in this place? How many faces of God have you seen in this place during the previous 48 hours?”

Was it in the picture clicked over and over of the nurses during the evacuation carefully placing sheets under the sickest residents in their wheelchairs and then lifting them in their “swaddling clothes” with enormous strength, and a power-house smile and, hoisting them onto a school bus, saying “You’re OK, you’re doing great, almost there”?

Was it in the picture in the gymnasium —

which, in the words of Pope Francis, was truly a field hospital — of a group of certified nursing assistants holding a blanket around one mattress while another aide changed the soiled resident? Could that have been the picture chosen by an editor for the textbook page on Catholic social teaching describing “human dignity”?

Was it the constant “yell out” of staff in that cavernous space, asking “Who knows this resident?” that always got a response: “Oh, he can swallow,” or “I know John. I’ll be right over.” In my own “theological reflection” afterwards, I hear Jesus the Good Shepherd in John’s Gospel saying, “I know mine and mine know me.” Our caregivers know their own — especially during the travails of this night watch.

Miraculously the Category 5 hurricane slowed down to a Category 1 by the time it reached St. Petersburg, though it still caused tremendous damage and power outages in the homes for these same caregivers for days, and even weeks, afterward. But the prayer — and most especially, the care — remained a Category 5, with its force of nearly 200 years of good help, *bon secours*, to those in need.

Karen Reich, the CEO ministry leader of Bon Secours St. Petersburg, shared a brief story from this powerful experience. The context was a heri-

tage pilgrimage reflection at the most recent systemwide executive council meeting, harkening back to our spring pilgrimage to Paris and the foundations of our sisters’ ministry.

Reich said that one of her most important responsibilities as the facility leader was to be the last one out during an evacuation, after doing one more walk-through to make sure no one was left behind. She said that as she finished and was walking down the hallway toward the front door, she found herself stopping and pausing at the heritage wall. As she looked at the pictures of the early sisters, she told us, at that moment she gathered inspiration and strength, thinking, “If you could do what you did, we can do this.”

She was right. This ministry experienced a Category 5 charism that hit landfall in 1824, in Paris, and it moved across continents to St. Petersburg, Florida, in 2017.

Has anyone ever seen God? Perhaps this hurricane experience gave us at least a look behind the veiled curtain.

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