



The Pandemic's Hidden Heroes

FR. JOSEPH J. DRISCOLL, DMin

Every day, every night, pictures of doctors and nurses in personal protective equipment, interviews with alarmed emergency department physicians, and heart-breaking stories from weary ICU nurses are featured in the media.

And then when it seems we just can't take any more, the pictures of patients wheelchaired down hallways lined with the same heroic caregivers applauding a needed good-ending story.

And these doctors and nurses are our heroes, always have been, and always will be.

But something is missing; no, some *ones* are missing.

The other heroes at the back, in the left and right corners, behind closed doors, even in the basement. All fighting the same pandemic with skill sets just as indispensable and protocols just as integral to the healing process. Environmental services, maintenance, transport, food services, laundry, registration and security.

The technology not only in respirators, surgical instruments and pharmaceuticals, but sterilization, safety, security and information services.

The compassion and commitment not only from those leading and speaking from the center, but the compassion and commitment from those working quietly and diligently from the back and on the sides.

THE DIRECTION OF JESUS' EYES

Why is it so important that as a ministry we look in the back, to the right and left corners, to those not in the front and center? Because Jesus did.

His eyes were always searching for the good people, *who labor and are burdened* and yet are hidden from plain view (Matthew 11:28).

His eyes looking from the Pharisee up front, center stage and public in his prayer, to the tax collector in the back of the Temple, barely whispering, *who stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven* (Luke 18:9-17).

Jesus saw his goodness and brought him and his humility out of the shadows.

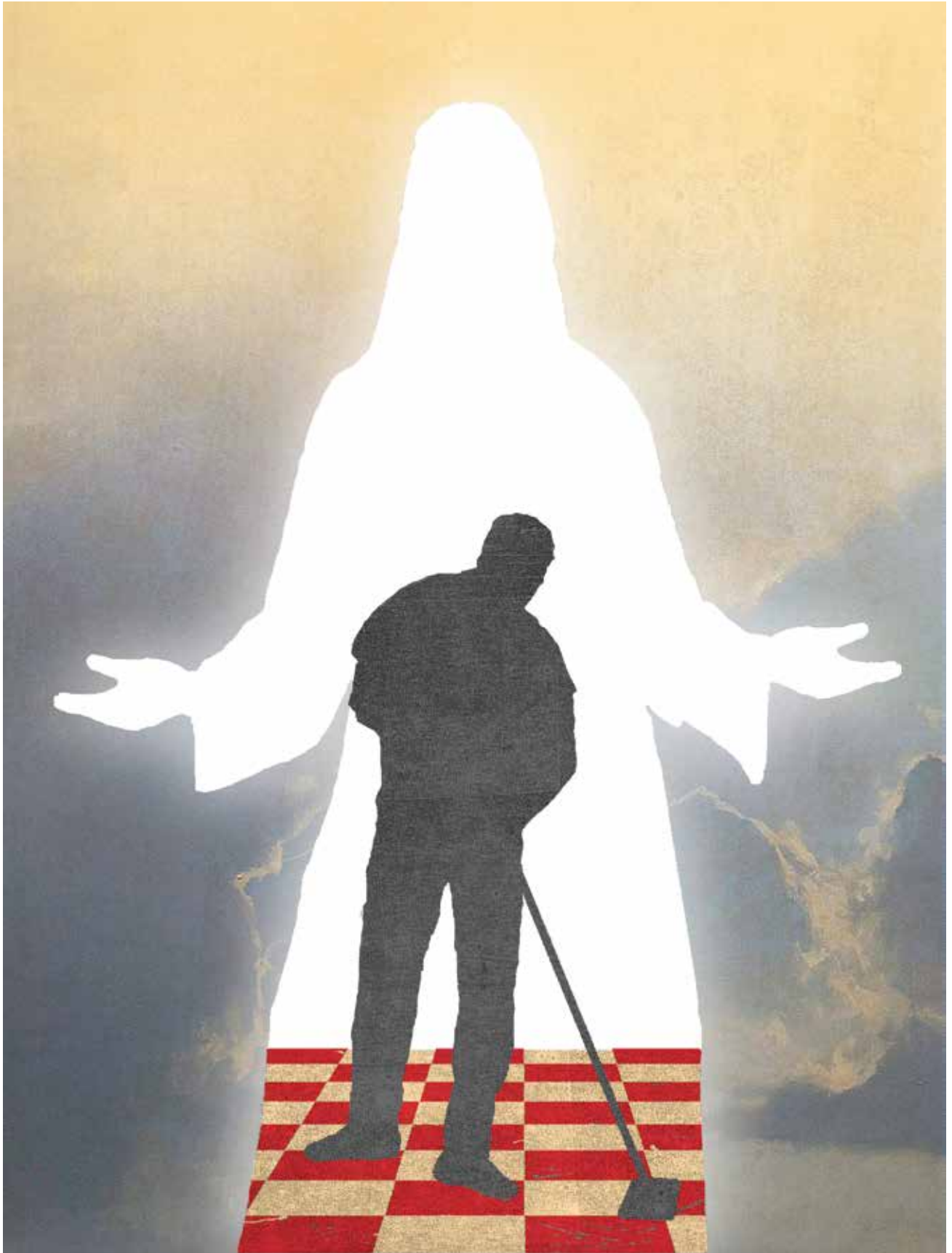
Another time, his eyes looking as he sat opposite the Temple treasury, Jesus saw rich people putting in large amounts in front of everyone while way to the side a poor widow shyly dropped two little copper coins *all she had, her whole livelihood* (Mark 12:41-44).

Jesus saw her goodness and called his disciples over to see genuine generosity hidden in the corner.

His eyes looking up a tree spotting Zacchaeus, a hated tax collector, determined not to let his small stature deprive him a view of this Jesus. *"Come down quickly,"* Jesus demanded, adding, *"for today I must stay at your house."*

Jesus saw his goodness and was equally determined to raise this man's moral stature above the muttering, *he has gone to stay at the house of a sinner* (Luke 19:1-10).

Jesus too had a so-called hidden life until he emerged out of the waters of the Jordan River at his baptism with visibility: *the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him*, and a voice: *You are my Beloved Son* (Mark 1:9-11).



This Jesus no longer hidden unseen, no longer silent unheard. His eyes searching for those in the back, behind the porticos of the Temple; his eyes turning to the edge of the seashore and looking to the sides of the road — seeing goodness and speaking God’s glory.

THE DIRECTION OF THE MINISTRY’S EYES

Why is it so important that as a ministry we point out those working in the back, laboring in the right and left corners, unseen among the seen in the center? Put simply, in doing so we live Jesus’ ministry of making visible the once invisible, making heard the previously unheard.

In the frame of Catholic Social Teaching, human dignity is measured with visibility and voice.

Johnnie Mae is starting her 51st year in the laundry at a skilled nursing facility down in the basement. She puffs with pride as she recounts hearing the elderly woman with dementia announce day after day the coming of “that laundry girl.” Johnnie Mae beams, “I turn around and it makes me feel good. It is beautiful to be recognized.”

Worried about the pandemic? “No,” she says, “at my age I can catch it, but I wear my mask and a shield. And besides I’m not afraid. God is looking after me. I’ve come this far, he ain’t gonna leave me.”

Jim, in his 36th year in maintenance at the hospital, speaks of the changes brought about by the pandemic.

“I’ve taken on the task of breaking down walls in at least 100 rooms creating ducts for ‘negative air,’ sucking it out so people are safe and the virus doesn’t spread.” Sometimes working 14-hour days, always careful to protect “my guys” so that they don’t get the virus.

“It’s a special place and I’m here for a reason.” Repeatedly, and with conviction, he speaks of respecting the patients. “I go into a room and I pretend they are my family. I don’t care who they are, I’m there for them.” The word “respect” is important for Jim. He uses it to describe how he treats others, how he hopes people look at him, and how he does his job.

Sheneka is proud of her five years in environmental services and her promotion two years ago to the NICU. “I make sure that unit is clean and sanitized. Every day I come bringing in my bright attitude and glossy smile.”

Her voice rises with excitement speaking of the birth of triplets so tiny and how she looked for-

ward to coming in and seeing them get bigger and bigger. “Those parents were so joyous,” she says.

She admits that the pandemic was frightening at first, and even with all the reassurances and safety protocols she felt unsure. “And then one day I thought, ‘I’m making a difference’ and then I was not afraid. I’m going to keep that place clean and safe for those babies.”

Ron has spent 47 years in food services cooking meals for residents and patients in various settings. “You know we say here that we ‘care, comfort and heal’ — yeah, that’s our saying. Not sure how I do it.”

He pauses and thinks a moment. “Well, maybe it’s like when I cook myself a good meal, filling my belly and afterward, I feel comfort. Yeah, maybe that’s how I do it.”

He is laughing, pleased with himself. Well, truth be known, yes, a belly laugh, at his own on-the-spot reflection on the mission.

The challenges of the pandemic affect his area in many ways. The masks and a lot of the little things that make work a little harder. “The work force is down, but you pick it up a notch. I try to help my fellow workers where I can.”

Fear of the virus? “No,” Ron declares assuredly,

“And then one day I thought, ‘I’m making a difference’ and then I was not afraid. I’m going to keep that place clean and safe for those babies.”

— SHENEKA

“God has a plan for all of us. If God calls, he is going to call you, pandemic or not.” He adds, “I pray for my fellow co-workers though.”

Johnnie Mae, Jim, Sheneka and Ron, no longer hidden unseen, no longer silent unheard. The ministry’s eyes seeing goodness and speaking God’s glory.

THE DIRECTION OF THE PATIENTS’ EYES

What else happens when a ministry looks toward the back, to the right and left corners, to those not front and center?

In the frame of Catholic Social Teaching, the common good is measured with participation and solidarity.

Our residents and patients are flourishing because behind the closed doors of rooms, and around the corners of the hallways, and in the porticos of chapels and meditation rooms, even



crowded elevator assembly areas, our residents and patients are experiencing goodness and, as Jesus would point out, God’s glory.

Ron relates a time he came off the elevator from the kitchen area and found himself surrounded by waiting wheelchairs, all the residents’ eyes on him, thinking “What the heck?” And then they ask him, “What’s for lunch?” “What would you choose?” “Did you make the meatloaf yourself?”

“I was the only one they wanted to speak to. And I saw all these eager faces looking to me, and I felt joy.” He pauses and you can tell he is tearing up, then he says, “Yeah, I’m feeling the tears.”

Participation is human flourishing. The feeding of the five thousand in Jesus’ story (Matthew 14:13-21); the feeding of the crowd of residents in the ministry story, the long-term care setting where Ron works.

“I love the people. I wouldn’t give up this job for all the world,” says Johnnie Mae, who works in Environmental Services. She goes on to talk about one resident, Ruth Ann. “She doesn’t have many visitors, so my girlfriend and I come and visit her. We buy her stuff at Christmas, you know. We are all together here.”

We are all together here.

Solidarity is human flourishing. The compassion in Jesus’ one-on-one encounters in Jesus’ story; the compassion in one-on-one encounters in the ministry story.

CONCLUSION

Ministry leadership is as much sitting around the cafeteria table as pulling up a chair at the board table. True ministry calling is as much listening to one worker in the basement as speaking to an assembly from the auditorium podium.

The always-central, ever-challenging question at the heart of what we call Catholic identity: what makes us distinctive?

Perhaps it is the direction that we focus our attention. Perhaps it is the direction of our eyes. Perhaps it is the direction of the eyes of Jesus in the gospels becoming the direction of our eyes as a ministry, my eyes as a ministry leader.

Or more importantly, the direction of the eyes of *all* people — looking toward, and listening to, the faces and the voices that are no longer invisible, no longer unheard.

And perhaps, in the so-called hidden life of our co-workers becoming visible, we will see *the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending like a dove*.

And the voice now heard — the world acclaims them as heroes — the Father proclaims them as *Beloved-sons and daughters*.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Fr. Joseph Driscoll, DMin, director of ministry formation and organizational spirituality at Redeemer Health in Pennsylvania, directs our gaze to the other health care heroes of the pandemic, asking us to seek them out in the backgrounds and off to the sides. While they’re perhaps not likely to be featured on the nightly news or serve as spokesperson for their health care system, these are the health care workers who keep the frontline functioning and the patients safe.

1. Throughout his article, Fr. Driscoll invites us to look through the eyes of Jesus to find the goodness and worthiness of the people around us. How effective do you feel his lines from Scripture are in identifying the people in our workplaces who show similar qualities? Do you have any ideas for how we can train our eyes to look beyond the front and center to better see all those working to make a difference in health care?

2. What did you think of the dialogue spoken by Ron the cook, Johnnie Mae of laundry, Sheneka of environmental services and Jim of environmental services about the respect they deserve and the pride they take in their work? How genuine did it sound? Do you think they get asked those questions very often?

3. What specific practices of communication and recognition are in place to acknowledge and thank your ministry’s hidden heroes? Can you think of other ways to maximize the communication between them and the people they care for? Or how to maximize opportunities for management to participate in such exchanges too?

4. Name some of the hidden heroes in your ministry. Recall the last time you spoke with them and how they embody the mission and values of your organization. Are there ways you can elevate their stories so they are celebrated too?

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