In Lynwood: A team of listeners, a team of angels
Written by Doris Benavides Friday, 13 December 2013 16:07

When Father Thomas Philip Mulavanal enters the room, Guillermo Madrigal’s face glows. They met only a few days ago, but they have established a bond through the priest’s appreciation for the 63-year-old layman, shown by the way he listens.

“He came and offered me help,” Madrigal, a patient of St. Francis Medical Center, says in Spanish. “It had been a while since I did confession, just out of neglect, so it was very good to do it, get things out,” he adds with a smile. “It’s good to have someone to listen.

“My wife and children attend Mass regularly, but I don’t,” he continues, “but from now on I will go to Mass and I will try to do confession more frequently.”

Father Philip’s advice is simple: “Just keep your faith up,” he tells the patient, who had fainted while showering. Madrigal, in reply, admits that faith is important, especially when “things in life get complicated.”

Moving on to other patients on this October day — in the middle of Spiritual Care Month — Father Philip tells a visitor that listening is the key in his ministry, the most important element in offering comfort to the patients he visits every day as one of the Lynwood hospital’s 10-member spiritual care team.

The focus of the team of chaplains, he continues, is to “be a healing presence; to be with the patients,” to “listen to them, listen to their stories and offer them comforting words.”

The soft-spoken priest arrived in Los Angeles in mid-2005 from the Archdiocese of Kottayam in Kerala, India, to enroll in the clinical pastoral education program at UCLA. Two years later he joined St. Francis’ spiritual care team as a full-time chaplain.

That is his passion, “serving people in a hospital.” Previously assigned as associate pastor at St. Mary Magdalene Church in West L.A. until he was hired by SFMC, Father Mulavanal and Discalced Carmelite Father Ambrose Joseph are the two priests on the team who share on-call 24/7 duties. (During weekends he also has pastoral duties at St. Pius X Syro-Malabar Rite Catholic Church in Montebello.)

Like all the team members, his day starts at 7 a.m. with visits to different floors, an 11:30 a.m. Mass at which he sometimes presides, lunch and more visits until 4 p.m.

But spiritual care is a need that knows no boundaries of time. The whole team is available when needed, especially the director, Friar of the Sick Poor Brother Richard Hirbe.

‘Dignity for everyone’
The door opens and three people come in. One is asleep — forever asleep.

And waiting for him patiently is Brother Richard, to say prayers for his soul. It is All Saints Day, about 4:50 a.m., in the morgue of St. Francis Medical Center.

Fresh blood can still be seen through the white plastic bag containing the body of the 30-year-old Latino man who arrived about an hour before in the emergency room, still alive, but his body racked by six bullet wounds.

Brother Richard — who had already seen the man at the ER — now kneels down to pray in front of the freezer where the
body has been stored to wait for family members to arrive — if they do arrive — to claim their relative's corpse. It could have been an early-morning drive-by shooting; it could have been a homeless man being assaulted. The coroner’s office is already working on the case.

In the meantime, Brother Richard prays for the man as if he were his own relative. He has already prayed for another adult inside another refrigerator in the room, and for a 20-week-old baby (considered a medical tissue) inside a small plastic container in a smaller freezer.

“Everyone in this room deserves the dignity that every human being deserves,” he says.

In the afternoon — by 4 p.m., after 12 hours of work — on his way home, Brother Richard will bury the unborn baby in All Souls Cemetery in Long Beach. He has buried many unborn babies there in his 13 years of chaplaincy at the hospital at St. Francis, babies either unclaimed by their parents, or from families who cannot afford their burial.

Although not mandatory, he considers it part of his duties. “It’s about the dignity of life,” he repeats.

That could be the mantra of St. Francis’ spiritual care team, who provide spiritual, sacramental and emotional care and support to patients, families and staff. In October, they celebrated their many decades of working together as a team and individually.

‘Ask simple questions’
Among the youngest on the team are Brother Cesar Galan, a former gang member who inspired Brother Richard to found the religious community Friars of the Sick Poor, and Sister Cecilia Nguyen, who after a period of discernment discovered her love for the sick and left another religious community to join the Daughters of Charity, the community that founded the 384-bed acute care hospital.

“It’s interesting finding people where they are at,” Brother Cesar says one morning while sharing his experiences as a chaplain, something the father of two did not contemplate even in his wildest dreams in the late 1990s. More than ten years ago he was left paraplegic after a shooting related to gang rivalry. One of his oldest brothers was killed during the same incident.

He uses his own experience to minister to youngsters and young adults who land in the hospital for similar reasons as he did.

“Listening” and “asking simple questions,” he says, is the key that opens the door to communicating with the patients and helping them express themselves, as happened with a 26-year-old man who was at the hospital after being shot for the ninth time in his life as a result of gang banging.

“I gave him some kind of direction,” says Brother Cesar, “and helped him go deeper in his life by sharing my own experience.”

As a chaplain, he tries to help the patients start the process of healing mind, body and spirit, and he also tries to convey a message of hope that in turn could help stop violence on the streets.

The same kind of hope is ministered by Sister Nguyen, who started in the field by “shadowing” other chaplains. “I shadowed everyone,” she smiles.

Once she discerned that becoming a hospital chaplain was her calling, she enrolled in the classes to earn the pastoral care certificate, which she did in a year, a record hardly anyone can break.

“It was hard,” she admits, especially since she was studying for her certificate at the same time she was learning English (her native language is Vietnamese).

But for the patients, “what counts is the language of the heart,” says Shirley Ann, a 49-year-old patient who suffers from kidney failure. “Not even your religious affiliation matters when you show love to someone,” adds the woman, who is a Baptist.

“She came to my room, prayed for me, with this glow in her face,” smiles the woman while lying on the bed after a dialysis treatment. “I love her; she’s my angel.”

And as the team members roam through the hospital, visiting an average of 30 patients a day in their full time schedule, a visitor can often hear the patients refer to these chaplains — mostly women religious — as their “angels.”
It is about being by the patients' side, they concur.

“You do not impose Jesus,” declares St. Columban Sister Grace DeLeon, who recently went back to her native Philippines to build a church. “We don’t convert, we give hope against hope. Suffering gives hope.”


“Patients are very pleased with all they do,” says Daughter of Charity Sister Alicia Martin, SFMC’s vice president of Mission Services. “They ensure the values and mission carried out in the hospital. Together they reflect that the power of [the] One equals a team.”

To contact Brother Richard Hirbe, St. Francis Medical Center's spiritual care director, call (310) 900-8514.

BLESSING — Fr. Thomas Philip Mulavanal, chaplain at St. Francis Medical Center, blesses patient Guillermo Madrigal, who says the priest helped him see some things in his life in a positive way. DORIS BENAVIDES

PRACTICAL ADVICE — Sister of the Sick Poor Laura Paz Sanchez advises the Garcia sisters on how to write a will and other practical matters, while their 79-year-old father Antonio Gamboa lies in bed. He had just been added to a kidney transplant waiting list. DORIS BENAVIDES

APPRECIATED — St. Francis’ spiritual care team includes (from left, standing) Father Thomas Philip Mulavanal, Sisters Grace DeLeon, Laura Paz Sanchez and Martha Rojo, Brother Richard Hirbe, and Sisters Janice Jones and Cecilia Nguyen. In front is Brother Cesar Galan. Not pictured are Sister Vanne Nguyen and Father Ambrose Joseph. DORIS BENAVIDES

FAITH — A mother of a newborn baby shows a Virgin of Guadalupe card and rosary handed to her by Sister of Providence Martha Rojo, maternity floor chaplain at St. Francis Medical Center. DORIS BENAVIDES

FORGOTTEN SOULS — Head of chaplains at SFMC, Br. Richard Hirbe’s daily routine starts at 4 a.m. when he goes down to the morgue to pray for the souls of those who haven’t been claimed by their families, including the unborn. DORIS BENAVIDES