

Dramas as Numerous as the Stars in the Heavens and the Sands on the Seashore



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Elsewhere in this issue of *Vision*, we rightly spotlight the present drama of the pastoral care movement in North America, our own association's participation in this exciting turning point in collaboration, and the powerful implications that these decisions have for the ministry of pastoral care, the ministers of pastoral care, and the people of God everywhere who are recipients of pastoral care.

Let the lights shine on these dramatic decisions before a worldwide audience (indeed our associations have members all over the world)! And shine they should.

And then let's let the lights go down. Let's exit the stage. Let's walk out of the theater of our public association with all the wonderful celebration in the banquet hall of Toronto.

We do that anyhow. The next day the hotel is empty, our friends and colleagues gone, our program finished. I always find myself sad the morning after, perhaps because I am often still at the hotel and the transformation from "our hotel" to "not our hotel" hits me so starkly.

But let's look out for a minute at the drama of salvation history acted out every day when God directs the smallest productions of kindness, love, and oneness of being. The sacred play of one singular life, one singular minister, one singular ministry, on one singular stage in the history of time and the geography of space, where God shines down in human dramas as numerous as the stars in the heavens and the sands on the seashore.

Flying at 37,000 feet in the air right now, I am returning to Milwaukee from Boston having buried my friend and mentor, Paul Sullivan. I cannot help but contrast the events of Toronto with its numbers—something like 15,000 of us were represented by the pastoral care and counseling associations in North America—and the individual number that each of us uniquely represents in our setting of this specialized ministry to those in our midst who are sick and dying.

We buried my friend Paul yesterday morning with the simplicity and dignity that was his for all of his 76

years of life here. His nephew Joe, in a beautiful and touching eulogy, raised the question of how many people his uncle had touched in his 50 years of priesthood. And that got me thinking about numbers.

On my flight to Boston I was answering some correspondence from members. Several letters were from retired persons who were writing to share their difficult decision not to renew their membership. I say "difficult" because you can sense the grieving in the loss of a significant relationship with the association as they share a little of their story, their gratitude to the NACC, and their prayers and best wishes for our future.

One woman religious, Sister Martha, is 92 years old, and has worked at this one hospital for 70 years, 35 in pastoral care! In a most touching detail, she shared that when the then priest chaplain lay dying, he looked up to her and asked if she would replace him in pastoral care (that was 1967). What a call to ministry!

Herein lies the drama of God in one singular life, one singular minister, in one singular ministry. How many persons crossed onto the stage of that hospital in sacred dialogue with this woman over those 70 years!

I was remembering my friend Paul and all the ways he touched my life and my priesthood, and I am just one who crossed the stage of this man's ministry. Paul was my deacon supervisor in a very small parish community of 450 families tucked away 40 miles north of Boston close to the ocean. He taught me how to be a parish priest.

Paul gave me a primer in the hospitality of ministry. His relaxed, laid back personality quickly slowed my frenzied "to do" active approach to ministry. The rectory at St. Mary's was an old farmhouse with all the quaint features of a New England white colonial home. I soon fell into the Saturday morning rhythm of sitting around the kitchen drinking coffee

and smoking cigarettes (those were the days!) and greeting parishioners as they stopped in to say hello on their way to the dump, or coming from the post office, or doing an errand. Stories and kidding rocked us with laughter; stories and discussions rolled us into “theological reflection.” The parish house was the *parish* house.

Speaking of smoking cigarettes, Paul and I went together to the small community hospital to visit Ruth who was rushed there with respiratory distress and was now fighting for her life on a ventilator. Ruth was a lovely, single, retired schoolteacher who, we learned that day, was also a closet smoker (single, female schoolteachers smoke during those days?—unimaginable!). Her struggle was so disturbing that after our visit we quietly walked down the corridor out the door, reached in our pockets, took out a cigarette, and wordlessly inhaled our anxiety and worry. After a minute or so, I looked at Paul, pointed to the absurdity of what we were doing, and we laughed all the way back to the car.

Paul taught me the guiding principle of all ministry—empowerment. And that was not, and is not, an easy lesson. He would not give answers to anyone. He would answer with a question, and if you pushed him, as I remember doing once, he’d give you his opinion, but then follow it up with another question.

One Sunday morning, a young man approached me as I was walking from the church next door to the parish house. He had a mile-long story of how he needed \$5.00 for a bus trip back to wherever he was going. He took off his watch and offered it to me as “collateral” if only I would give him the \$5.00. “Well, here’s an honest person in real need,” I thought.

I had him wait while I went into see Paul about getting \$5.00. “I wouldn’t give it to him,” he said, as a matter of fact. I pleaded my case. “But Paul, he’s sincere,” and here was my ace, “he’s willing to give me his watch!” “I still wouldn’t give it to him, but you do what you want.” I was stunned, and angry. “What a cold-hearted person!”

I got \$5.00, and I remember approaching the man, wanting to plead with him, “You’re my first charity decision, don’t ruin this for the rest of my priesthood.” Instead I wrote down my name and address and told him that it was very important that he send back this money so that I could help the next person. He nodded, uttered endless thank yous, and you know the end of that story.

Parishioners would get frustrated with Paul because he would not tell them what to do. He would guide them, clarify the issues, support them, but in the end, it was their life and their decision. He had lay people running everything in the parish. He had

adult discussion groups, neighborhood gatherings, formation, and ongoing education programs.

When I arrived, Paul was leading a group discussing a pastoral letter entitled, “The People of God,” written by the newly installed young bishop of Albany, Howard Hubbard. The dialogue was intense, exciting, and hopeful as I was thrown into this dynamic group of people caught on fire with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. And the spark came from this unassuming, singular actor on a set in a tiny parish tucked away from the glamour and buzz of the big city.

I never did get to tell Paul that a year or so ago I met Bishop Hubbard at the annual bishops’ meeting and told him that we had used his pastoral letter nearly 25 years ago in my deacon parish.

Finally, Paul taught me the power of humor to humble us when our wonderful designs for the world and the Church tumble down and collapse, or the power of humor to lift us when our shameful weaknesses threaten to bury us in remorse.

Paul was so humble that at his funeral, his homilist and longtime friend, said that most of his brother priests and family did not know until his death that he had a doctorate in pastoral counseling. Most people probably don’t know that Paul got up early each morning and wrote poetry, at least he did 25 years ago when I lived with him. And I only know because I used to see him writing when I came down to get my coffee.

Paul preached the homily at my first Mass. He told me later that when he had finished the text he asked his secretary who was typing it what she thought. This was typical of Paul—her opinion was as valuable as anyone else’s. She told him that it was boring and impersonal. He worked on it some more.

And herein lies the drama of one singular life, one singular minister, in one singular ministry—from only one person.

As an association, or now as a consortium of associations, we at our best strive to support quality ministry through standards, certification, education, advocacy, and professional development—worded differently at different times and for different cultures. When we do this well we affect huge numbers. But each of us is one number—has one ministry—on a stage peculiar in history and geography. And God’s light shines there.

As we celebrate the light of God shining on an empty tomb, we, in our faith tradition, celebrate what is for us the greatest drama of God in human history. This Easter then, let us know too that this scene is memorialized daily in every dialogue on every stage in our individual ministry, not just in the liturgy on the day of our Christian burial. ▼

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