

From the Pastor's Desk

Dear Friends in Christ,

In looking at these photos supplied by San Juan Regional Medical Center, it seems like a whole other world, a whole other time to me. In the last four weeks, I have not had to visit a Covid patient. When these photos were taken, we were in the midst of the terrible Delta Variant outbreak and so many got sick and so many died.

I think I -- perhaps all of us -- are just coming to terms with what we went through in those dark months of late 2021 and early 2022. I remember walking down the hallways with Rev. Linda Stetter, the hospital chaplain, wondering when this sadness and fear would end. I give so much credit to Rev. Stetter for helping me minister to the patients and the staff during this very hard time.

She came into her position right in the middle of the pandemic and in her taking on the chaplaincy, she invited ministers to come to minister to their people. It was her great sadness that only a few accepted her invitation. I didn't do it because I was brave. I didn't do it because I was fearless. I was not brave nor was I fearless. I knew I was going into the "belly of the beast" in visiting so many sick and dying people with this highly contagious disease. But it was my sacred duty to visit the sick and dying. I couldn't live with myself if I had the opportunity to give the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick and decided not to for my own well-being.

So at Rev. Stetter's invitation and encouragement, I began visiting once a week, on Wednesdays. I had no idea how bad the pandemic was until I walked the hallways of San Juan Regional Medical Center. The hospital was full of Covid patients.

The photo of Rev. Stetter (in red) helping me "gown up" was only one step in the process for each room I had to enter. I had to put on double gloves for my protection. I had to have on a special mask. And then over that I had to put the plastic shield. I would enter the room and anoint each patient. Rev. Stetter had worked in Catholic hospitals over the years and so she was attuned to why the Anointing of the Sick was so very important to Catholics. She said to me on that first day: "Father, if someone is in the hospital with Covid, they are very sick. If they are in ICU with Covid, there is a good chance they will not survive. I think you should anoint everyone who is Catholic." I agreed and that is what I did. With Covid, a patient could seem just fine one day and go south the next and pass away quickly. It happened all too often. So I am thankful I was able to give them the sacrament of healing, whether they survived or did not.



The photo of Rev. Stetter and me both talking on our cell phones may seem humorous, but it was in this moment that Rev. Stetter was being called to be with a family having to let go of their loved one who had Covid and was rapidly dying. I was speaking to my secretary about a sick person outside the hospital who was asking me to come to visit them. The cell phone was an important tool in my hospital visits because if Rev. Stetter was called away to another emergency (which was often in those awful days), she could locate me and I could locate her.

The photo of me hugging the little lady makes me smile. The cleaning crew were the bravest of the brave. Working with minimum wage salaries, these good people were on the front lines cleaning the rooms of Covid patients while they were in their beds and, sadly, once a Covid patient passed away. I remember this nice lady, a member of Sacred Heart Parish, waving to me out of a Covid room as she wiped down the glass of an ICU room. Such bravery. Such goodness. I blessed her each week and she would hug me in thanks. And she would tear up because of the stress and worry she had to live with each and every day.



From the Pastor's Desk Cont.

A hug was important in my work as I prayed with and blessed the staff, including the nurse in ICU who drove back and forth from Cortez, Colorado. The sickness and death must have overwhelmed the doctors and nurses, but they kept doing what they could do in this crisis.

In the darkest days of the pandemic, the Army and then the Navy sent field workers to help out the strained hospital staff and facilities. I would see these uniformed young men and women marching here and there, doing what they could in the midst of this terrible emergency and I thanked God for them, though their presence just underscored the terrible toll this pandemic was taking, in our community.



And the final photo is of me in my "moon suit" as I called it. I had wear this outfit into the Covid room when I was visiting the sick person. This was an ICU room and I knew this person had to be near death. There was a small chance an ICU person with Covid would survive. If they were on their bellies, I knew the case had become hopeless.

In the worst of the pandemic, I might visit 20 or 30 Covid patients, which meant I had to change in and out of this outfit each time. When I was changing out of the outfit, I had to squirt antiseptic onto my gloved hands before disposing of them and had to carefully cleanse my helmet. When I got home, I had to put my clothes in a plastic bag apart from my other clothes and wash them. I had to shower thoroughly and dress in clean clothes. It was a grueling process.



A couple of weeks ago, a young woman was in the gym where I go to work out and I overheard her say her breathing was slowly returning. I quietly asked her if she had had Covid. "Yes, Father Tim, and in my worst moment when I knew I was dying, you came in and you told me to fight it and then you anointed me. I was so afraid. And when you anointed me, I knew I would not go on that ventilator and I never did. And here I am back in the gym. I have a long way to go, but thank you for that hope you gave me. It was so lonely, so lonely and you were the only one to come to visit me. Thank you." She was a young woman and months later she is still struggling with the effects of Covid.

And finally a middle-aged man said to me, "When you came into my hospital room in that outfit, I had no idea who you were. I knew I was dying and yet, when you came in and I found out it was you, you anointed me and I suddenly knew I would survive. I had to survive. You don't know what your visit meant!"

In this Easter Season, I just thank God we are rapidly coming out of this nightmare called Covid. It has been a long road for sure, but I am happy and honored that I could, in some small way, be God's messenger of hope in the midst of so much despair. That is an honor of my priesthood.

May those who passed away rest in peace. May those who are still recovering from Covid find healing. May God bless Rev. Stetter, the doctors and nurses, the cleaning staff and so many others who saw the daunting task ahead and stuck with it through thick and thin. You are all an inspiration!

Sincerely in Christ,

Rev. Tim Farrell,
Pastor

