

On Hospice and Homebound

Rev. Deacon Paul M. Cherkas

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It was Lewis Carroll who said that one of the noblest things we can do is to do for those who are not able to without expecting any reward for our actions. However, many of my most rewarding days are those when I walk into a parishioner’s room in a nursing facility and see the change in their whole demeanor. I can usually count on getting an instant smile unless the person is very ill that day. There isn’t any amount of money that can buy the feeling that I get when these elderly people look up and their faces seem to say, “What a pleasant surprise. Even if I have had a bad day before coming to see them, I can’t help but leave feeling that my problems are so insignificant that I feel I should put them aside, at least for a time. The people that I visit are those who have been involved for as many as 40, 50, or 60 years in their church’s life and are now literally thirsting for knowledge of news about their parish. Imagine, here they are, sometimes miles away and they still wonder what’s going on in their parish. I have to tell you that I experience embarrassment whenever my fellow parishioners tell me that they know about and regard my ministry as being wonderful to our church community. I wish that I could talk some of them into coming to visit with me because it would be even more of a comfort. That would be even more wonderful not only for me but for them and the shut-ins who thirst for contact with their parish. I will, however, spend more time discussing this more at length later.

Just a few years ago I took an ambulatory elderly gentleman to visit a fellow parishioner who was about the same age. Both were World War II vets and they spent about a half hour reminiscing about their years in the South Pacific. The gentleman's wife who was in the next bed kept asking me what in the world the two of them were having such great time discussing.

I have been visiting with our parishioners who are either homebound for the most part or are now in nursing facilities well before I was tonsured a Subdeacon. The closest is a half mile away from my home and the furthest about forty miles away. I try to get out and visit each one about every other week but sometimes "things" get in the way. Those "things" can range from busy weeks when services, doctor's appointments, and just plain lethargy take seem to take precedence over what I feel is my responsibility. Yup, lethargy can sometimes conflict with what is really important.

I have stop and tell you a bit about this responsibility thing. The day after my ordination, I awoke realizing my life would never be the same. I felt as if I had to get going and do whatever I was chosen to do. I am really fortunate that I married someone who takes my ministry seriously and is not afraid to let me know whenever I need to spend more time doing what is important – not only bringing the parish to the parishioners is definitely one of her priorities but simply checking up on them is equally important to her. Believe me. She is not bashful about letting me know what I should be doing whenever I allow myself to become distracted. The one thing that she allows me to find relaxation with is fly fishing. It is my time talking to or rather I should say talking with God. The rhythm of the fly line and the retrieve of the line seem like take on a subconscious conversation with God that is only distracted by an actual hook up. In fact, I mostly debarb my hooks so that I can easily allow the occasional hookup drop off.

Notice that I did not say former parishioners when I spoke about these people because the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the USA still regards shut-ins as parishioners and we subsequently pay diocesan dues for them annually even if they are no longer able to financially contribute themselves. So, when someone tells me that so and so was a member of our parish, I like to remind them that these people still are parishioners. They are and

always will be even after they have fallen asleep in the Lord. That's why we commemorate them at Liturgies.

People keep telling me what a wonderful thing I am doing. I wonder what's so unique about it. Christians were doing this for almost several thousand years ago. Yes, people in nursing homes are suffering or close to death in some instances. Yes, they often tell me the same stories over and over again but I can simply listen and actually in some instances can understand why they do so and what actually is bothering them. That weekly phone call from a son or daughter is fine but what shut-ins really yearn to be hugged and touched in person. In some instances, we have chosen to put our loved ones on the shelf like books that we have read ...now simply allowing them to gather dust.

Recently, many of my visitations to the shut-ins had been with clergy as well with my wife. The shut-ins often ask how she is doing and I sometimes feel that the women shut-ins yearn for feminine company. Often, shut-ins crave a sense of normality that existed in the environment in which they lived in for so many years and they actually miss the company of their peers. I especially have had memorable visits when my wife or granddaughter has accompanied me to visit shut-in

Sometimes, after a few years isolation from their parish grows as their friends often find themselves not as ambulatory as they once were, or their own families often visit less and less as time goes by. I try not to be judgmental about people's behavior but often I find myself seething inside and becoming judgmental, wondering how someone who was cared for when they were brought into this world cannot care for their own parents in the same way that they once were. I am not condemning people who place their parents or loved ones into nursing care because they have to. Many times, it is the only option. But simply allowing them to languish is something that I find difficult to understand.

The one thing that Pani Mary Ann and I have not regretted is that at several times we interrupted our lives to care for our loved ones. We have kept my father home with us after several strokes, my grandmother in the next room for a few weeks while my own mother recovered from her own surgery and my mother-in-law for almost a year when she needed round-the-clock care. Our neighbors have probably seen ambulances in front of our home

more often except for one other family's home on our street. These circumstances actually tested and strengthened our own families. All of us, including our children, have no regrets and feel it strengthened our family bond. The furniture in our spare room has been moved so many times, I suspect it's still a bit dizzy.

Imagine living the rest of your life in constant predictable daily repetition. This is a repetition that causes you to lose track of time and lets every day to simply become like any other one unless some medical appointment gets you out of the facility or there is a change in menu that may break the monotony of your life. And the reality is that people my age are growing in increasing numbers and nursing facilities and senior communities will increase in numbers as a result.

We in the Ukrainian Orthodox jurisdiction are increasingly finding our ordained clergy maintaining additional jobs to support or supplement their salaries to support and educate their families that their clerical salaries do not permit. Actually, that very set of circumstances along with our own aging led to an increased role in serving the shut-ins of our parish. It dawned on me one day that God already knows my faults and sins. However, I suddenly worried that when I came to my own judgment, He would simply ask me what I did with the life that He gave me. I think the answer will be that I hope I somewhat have made up for the years I wandered about, not realizing what purpose I was put here on earth.

I am blessed that in many respects I have in my wife a relentless partner and helper. Pani Mary Ann sees so many things that escape my attention. We men have a certain type of ADD that drives our attention to overlook things that seem to be in full view of our wives. I don't know how many times Pani Mary Ann has mentioned to me that so and so hasn't been in church for a few weeks.

Only last month, she thought it odd that certain 93 year old lady had not called either Saturday evening or on Sunday morning about getting a ride to Sunday services. Mary Ann had a bad feeling, especially when the lady didn't answer her phone by 8:30. Usually, like clockwork, Eugenia would call whenever she didn't want Mary Ann to pick her up. The lady wasn't answering her phone or her doorbell as well. So, when there was no response to

doorbell ring, Mary Ann immediately called my son who is a fireman and asked what he felt she should do. He felt that the only way to be certain the lady was alright was to have the fire department enter the house, without causing a great deal of damage. So, four policemen and seven firemen found the elderly lady still in bed, startled. She had taken a sleeping pill at 3 AM because she kept hearing voices from behind her house. Moreover, the home had a smell of gas because her son who doesn't live with her had turned blown out the pilots but not shut off the gas valve. Soon after this incident the same woman ended up in the local hospital and then in a nursing home because she had developed a urinary infection and became septic. Voila, low doses of natural gas were reducing oxygen volume in home and coupled with the infection made for a dangerous situation.. Hopefully, we can find her a safe living environment where she can be monitored closely to prevent the same type of infection to whatever extent is possible and providing a safe environment for this lady.

Perhaps, the most changing event for Pani Mary Ann and I was our recent summer trip to Ukrainian orphanages with one of our hierarchs, Archbishop Daniel who actually grew up there in the Soviet era. I had gone on the mission trip the previous summer and I found it difficult to relate in words all that I saw without becoming emotional. Pani Mary Ann decided to join me on the second mission trip. It was even more rewarding than even the previous trip was because she and the other two women from our parish, who also travel with us, pointed out things that unfortunately the male mind often fails to recognize. The more mobile orphans got most of our team's attention almost daily when we there. It was the ones that were confined to cribs and highchairs or who were not as mobile who did not get anywhere the same attention.

When we began to spend equal time with the orphans who had even more severe disabilities, these often overlooked people became more involved in interaction with us and their responses to the stimulation of human contact were often surprising. For instance, the Pani learned from one of the nannies that a certain girl who was 11 only talked to herself but never directly with the nannies. Yet after only a short while when she was given one on one attention and stimulation such as listening to simple songs such as Frere Jacque, this withdrawn girl, Oksana, began to mimic the words of the song in

response. She would play games with Mary Ann with her deformed hands. We soon found ourselves taking these less mobile orphans outside on the orphanage grounds, something that they rarely enjoyed.

These confined orphans are cared for as best as the short-staffed nannies can and we came to believe that all the nurses and nannies who cared for these people were doing as best as they could. The financial circumstances that the orphanage deals with do not permit the kind of rehabilitation that we enjoy here in this country. Right now, the orphanage has only one rehabilitation therapist to work with all of the orphans who require therapy. The facility also has another problem and that is what to do when the orphans reach the age of 18 and according to the laws should be placed in the community. Most are kept in this orphanage environment because they would, in all probability be exploited and abused, if they were put out on their own into the community. So, the orphans either never seem to reach the age of 18 or they are kept on as staff. Our Ukrainian Orthodox Church of USA not only pays for the expense of retaining these orphans but actually funds some of the volunteer workers from the town that help the regular staff to care for the orphans.

This trip made such an impact on the ladies from our parish that when they had returned from the ten day stay at the orphanage; they began to vocalize the needs that they saw while on this mission trip. Coincidentally, our annual Ukrainian Orthodox League Convention was held in Rhode Island this past summer and the ladies who participated in the mission trip strongly urged that this organization to contribute to some of the needs of the orphanage as a mission project. As a result there already has been a warm response from many people who been made aware of this need. By the way Pani Mary Ann and I plan to return again to the orphanage next June and take along our youngest granddaughter, Marissa. We feel it is an opportunity for her to expand her horizons in many areas and add to her maturity.

Just making people around you aware of the suffering that exists in this world is a mission in itself. Tending to those who need the kind of therapy that love and attention brings should be our main mission. It is the mission that Christ wanted us to take on ourselves. There is no doubt that women often make up for some of the shortcomings that we men

often seem to have. Both my wife and I feel that if the Roman Catholic Church had more women involved in its ranks, there might have been less sexual abuse as well as attempts to conceal its existence. Children are more apt to be trusting of women than men at a certain age. I believe that sexual abuse of any kind would have been more difficult to hide and would have been exposed much earlier than it was. I have a feeling that God knew what He was doing when He made woman to be the vessel that not only permitted the Incarnation of Son but actually the vessel leading to the salvation of His creation. When God created woman, He created the earliest nurturer that engrains the love of God in the child almost from the time the child is born. Much of what we learn about God is learned in the first few years of our development. Just as importantly, she is the caretaker of the family from birth to death.

Recently, I heard a group of men recently comment that the church has become feminized over the years. A comment was made that men have always been the head of the church and have allowed that role to be taken away in some respects. I never expected that comment and actually not hear anyone else object to it. I strongly believe that in many if not most parishes if the men are the head, then women often are the backbone of parishes. In our parish more women teach Sunday school classes than men. They generally plan and direct parish events such as festal dinners, festivals, concerts and other parish events and generally do most of the cleanup as well. They help clean our churches and decorate them for Feast Days.

Lastly, I have even heard some women comment that there really isn't any need for any further needed role for women in the Church's life and that our clergy do a fine job of ministering to the spiritual needs of shut-ins, for example. I won't argue that some do but in some cases visits are just not frequent enough because they are sometimes spread thin and so this ministry suffers. As someone who has tended to shut-ins for seven or more years because there was a real need to do this, I feel that there is a role that some women are suited to take on in our church. That role may not be at the altar in this day and age but it is just as importantly it might be in ministering to the spiritual needs of the elderly of our parishes as well as helping with their physical needs. I strongly feel that women will open up to other women in whom they feel comfortable with. For instance, I frequently stay with

homebound male parishioners while their wives run errands, do their shopping, and even get to take in their grandchildren' events and some of our retired parishioners do so as well. It is up to our hierarchs to decide what roles women will have in the 21st Church but I have noticed the increasing number of grey hairs in our churches and most of them belong to women who have outlived their spouses.