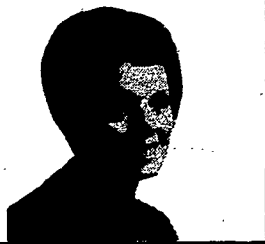


Sr. Susan Schantz, SSJ



Viewpoint: Sisters Reflect

Chaplaincy: Ministry Of Following

Hospital chaplaincy has helped me learn two languages. When I share sacraments with patients, I am breaking bread with men and women whose lives are

teaching them the meaning of Jesus' life and death and rising. Often their learning is something they can share with me, through a hand-clasp, a prayer, tears or a conversation. Always I am moved by the simple and profound signs of faith we share in our Church — bread, water, wine, oil. And

the hospital world enhances the signs of our celebration:

- the cup of cold water
- the soothing with oil and touch
- the persistent offering of nourishment
- the bathing and cleansing and binding of wounds.

Penance and Eucharist and Sacrament of the Sick speak in a language understood here. In those ordinary gestures, God offers healing to and through ordinary people.

The other shared language of hospital and Church is that which expresses concern for the quality of human life. I had learned, before beginning chaplaincy, of the wealth of Church teaching on human dignity, the meaning of suffering, right to health care, workers' rights, etc. Until this ministry, however, my learning and, I suspect, my teaching, were in the abstract. The plunge into hospital ministry was the equivalent of having theology teachers say, "For your final exam, talk to people. Ask the 30-year-old mother of four about contraception. Discuss ERA

with the woman personnel director. Listen to the intensive care physician, two ICU nurses, three family members and one patient about euthanasia. Hear the dying man review his life. Interview a maintenance worker and a nurse on the workers' right to organize."

Patients, families and hospital staff work together daily to respond to such issues and questions. The faith with which people make difficult decisions has enriched my life. The communion of saints with whom I am personally acquainted has greatly increased in number.

Chaplaincy, like all

pastoral ministry, is leadership ministry. In my experience, it is also a ministry of following. The hospital chaplain is invited to follow other Christians to work, to follow them to hospital beds and waiting rooms. There they communicate in signs that cross through pain and death. There they speak about and make difficult decisions. There they are still, and know that God is truly God with them, promising a time when mourning and tears will be no more and the healing work complete.

(Sister Susan Schantz, SSJ, is chaplain at Highland Hospital, Rochester.)

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