



Lent

Choosing Gratitude

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Lent began for me a few weeks ago in a local nursing home.

For most priest friars, I suspect, visits to nursing homes are pretty routine. Someone's health slips, a social worker calls, you visit, anoint and come home.

Last week, however, that changed for me. I was called to a local nursing home to anoint "Robert", a formerly homeless man who was nearing death.

Though sweating profusely and very weak, Robert was alert and anxious for the prayer and comfort the anointing of the sick can bring. As we chatted before the anointing, I learned that Robert had no living relatives. He smiled wanly as he said this. Most of his adult years had been spent abusing alcohol and drugs, and he had been in the nursing home for the last two years without a single family visitor.

Robert wept softly as we prayed together. Embarrassed, he asked me to excuse his tears. I wanted to cry myself when he said this. Here was a man who had lost everything but his faith. He was ready to die, he assured me, and depended on the mercy of God. Smiling ruefully, he assured me that God still loved him, even if it was very difficult!

A few minutes later as I was ready to leave, the fellow in the next bed called me. "Thank you, Father," he said, "for visiting Robert. Both of us have been together in this room for the last two years and I am going to miss him. Every Sunday we went to mass together on TV and afterwards talked about how important faith is. My children also know Robert well, and they will miss him, too." Then 'Francis', an elderly black man, began to cry. "Life was hard for Robert, Father", he said. "Thank you so much for praying with him." With that I opened the curtain between the two men and the three of us prayed an Our Father in gratitude for the goodness of God and the gift of friendship.

Lent is a season of gratitude for all that God is and all that God has done for us, especially in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. That is why at the beginning of this essay I said that Lent began for me in a nursing home. Leaving Robert and Francis, I was very grateful for the chance to visit with two men from very different circumstances who became brothers in Christ while bedridden because of their shared faith. Without Francis, Robert would have died without a single tear being shed for him. With Francis he found a path to peace and hope in eternal life. And buoyed by Robert and Francis' faith, I found a wonderful way to begin Lent.

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