

Graced experiences and lessons learned from our elderly

In recent weeks, I have celebrated Masses at two assisted living/nursing care facilities in the Saginaw area. During more than 40 years of parish ministry, I have offered these liturgies many hundreds of times at these kinds of facilities. I want to share about some important lessons I have learned from these graced experiences.

As a young and inexperienced priest, I was very uncomfortable celebrating Mass in these “institutions” because I was intimidated by the medical character of the setting and by the age and physical condition of the residents. I was often outside my comfort zone personally and professionally. This kind of liturgy was not one of the favorites on my list of pastoral responsibilities.

Over the years, most of the physical elements of this particular ministry have not changed all that much. For the most part, the Masses are still held in a common room or dining room, using a table of some kind for the altar, and many (or most) of those gathered for the liturgy are seated in wheelchairs scattered around the room. What has changed the most at these Masses is me. What have I learned?

This ministry has taught me to be more flexible, both personally and liturgically. The level of attention and participation at one of these Masses is usually quite different from what might be expected in church at a weekend liturgy: at times most of the congregation may be asleep or distracted in some way; some may be crying out for assistance or singing an unrecognizable tune or repeating the prayers of the Mass after me; staff are often moving in or out of the room for some purpose. This is not Mass in the idealized atmosphere of a monastery – it is liturgy in the midst of real life.

I gradually learned to be more flexible in my expectations about these Masses and ready to make adaptations as needed. For example, the Scripture readings usually need to be much shorter than usual, a verse or two is often enough for us. This is no time for a lengthy homily – a few words of encouragement spoken from the heart about God’s tender love for us is what we all need to hear. Distributing Holy Communion often brings special challenges when there are residents with mental and physical issues.

Fortunately, no major medical emergencies have happened during a Mass at any of these facilities, but there have been all kinds of distractions to deal with and adaptations to make, moments when you have to smile and times when you want to weep. Through it all, you do the best you can to worship the Lord and feed his people.

My liturgical ministry in these care facilities has also taught me humility. The men and women gathered for the Eucharist have included former teachers and political leaders, well-known doctors and judges, and respected members of the community. They are parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. They have raised families and have carried great responsibilities. Many of them have far deeper faith than I will ever have. They now need special care because of physical and mental weaknesses.

I have come to realize what a blessing it is for me to be able to celebrate the Eucharist with these brothers and sisters. They have already given so much to so many others in the community and in the Church, and this is one way that I can do something with them and for them. I like to give blessings to others – I am humbled when I realize how many blessings I receive from them.

It is also humbling to realize that where they are now, I will probably be one day not so long from now. That is one reason why so many of us are uncomfortable when we visit hospitals or nursing care facilities – we are reminded of our human weakness and vulnerability. Hopefully, this discomfort can lead to humility.

Besides flexibility and humility, these special Masses have also helped me develop a deep sense of gratitude for the staff, family members of the residents (especially children) and parish volunteers who come to be with the residents at these liturgies. In addition to the practical assistance they provide in getting everything ready for the Mass and attending to the individual needs of the residents during the service, their presence and their participation in the liturgy are a special source of spiritual support for me and for each other.

If there is a regular Mass or other liturgical service at one of these care facilities in your area, I encourage you to participate when and if you can. I guarantee that you will feel uncomfortable at first, but over time you will be blessed in many ways by this experience – as I have been blessed. †



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