

Holy moments

by Daniel J. Finkbiner

Chaplains live and move in an apocalyptic zone, a liminal space between worlds. Between sacred and secular, chaplains offer presence and care in a variety of ways. Between the here and the hereafter, chaplains facilitate expression of grief for the dying and their loved ones. Between the many human divisions, chaplains facilitate rituals that fit the moment of need.

Five nights a week from 12:00 to 8:30 a.m., I go to my shift at Geisinger Wyoming Valley Medical Center in Wilkes-Barre, Pa. It is a mid-sized regional medical center, level 2 trauma center, heart center, and stroke center. Every shift is unique, and I never know what awaits.

One night, I learned that a young adult was dying of COVID-19. Before the transition to end-of-life comfort measures, the family requested a blessing including holy water. In their Roman Catholic tradition, holy water serves as a tactile reminder of Christian baptism. I searched through the supplies in the spiritual care office and found holy water in a plastic bottle. Wanting a more official looking vessel, I found an empty saltshaker.

Since people in my department do not enter COVID rooms, I worked closely with the bedside nurse to provide a blessing from the doorway while the nurse sprinkled the holy water on the patient. A speaker phone connection allowed family at the bedside and family outside the room to hear the words of blessing and prayer.

It is these holy moments in the in-between that fuel and sustain my work as a chaplain. One thing that drives me is a conviction that human beings can encounter God and grow in faith and understanding during times of difficulty and crisis. That process is ultimately out of my hands, but it is an honor and a privilege to offer presence and care in such times.

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