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Letters from the Park

Letter #7

April 27, 2020

Third Sunday of Easter: Emmaus

*Carefull Healers**

To the Larger St. Mary's Community: *Letters from the Park* are weekly letters to St. Mary's seminarians sent home during the Covid-19 emergency I would like to share with the larger St. Mary's community, friends and supporters of St. Mary's.

Dear Seminarians,

We're hearing a lot about "healthcare heroes" right now. Healthcare providers are our heroes in the battle against coronavirus, especially those on the frontlines in hospitals, emergency rooms and other care facilities. Also those working in nursing homes, and those working night and day to find effective treatments and the vaccine that will eventually allow us to return to a more normal way of life. Most don't think of themselves as heroes and don't want to be thought of as heroes. They are dedicated, hardworking professionals who work in "caring" professions. Caregivers not just because they take care of people, but because they care *about* people. But what really motivates them, I sometimes ask myself? Why would people put their own health and well-being, even their lives at risk to care for people who have, or may be carrying a highly contagious disease—a virus easily transmitted from one person to another through the slightest contact that can have devastating health consequences? There seems to be an innate humanitarianism among these caregivers. But where does that humanitarianism come from? Is it truly innate? Are people born with it, is there a gene that implants it in people, or was it somehow nurtured in them: in the homes and families they grew up in, passed on by the culture they live in? There's too much evidence of the evil human beings are capable of to believe it's a gene. There has to be something else, something that calls forth the innate goodness of such people and suppresses the human tendency toward selfishness and evil.

We're focusing on physical health right now, but health is about a lot more than just physical health: mental health; emotional health; spiritual health and well-being. These are challenged by the pandemic also. It has caused a lot of fear and anxiety, challenges to peoples' emotional sense of well-being. The vast changes in the way we live, and a general sense of anxiety have been especially hard on those mentally or emotionally fragile to begin with; but we're all getting a little edgy from being cooped up for so long, aren't we? Spiritually many have remarked how hard it is not to be able to go to church services where people gather to worship in common and to be a spiritual support for one another. Morale is an aspect of health, too. When sick, we need healing; but we don't just get sick

physically: we can also be unwell mentally, emotionally, morally and spiritually. We need healthcare providers who take care of our physical well-being, but also providers of care for mind, emotions and spirit, as well.

Jesus was a healing presence. That's what we see in the Gospel this Sunday, the Emmaus story. Disciples on the road who are fearful and anxious, not knowing what's going to happen, still in shock over what did happen to someone they'd placed so much trust, so much faith, so much hope in. Now it seems all for naught; that they, too, might be in mortal danger for having followed him. Then this man appears and begins to walk along with them and explain all the scriptures referring to him from Moses on. Their fear begins to go away; trust, faith, hope return, and their hearts begin to burn within them. Eventually they come to recognize him in the Breaking of the Bread, his presence among us ever since, even as he disappears from sight. His presence healing fear, anxiety, doubt and despair, and the paralysis that would have prevented them from telling others of his love, his healing, his presence throughout all time to all the world.

This is not the first pandemic the world has experienced, nor will it likely be the last. There have been plagues before. In the 1300's the Black Death, claiming at least one-third of Europe's population. In the 1500's the Plague of Charles V (Holy Roman Emperor at the time), and later the Plague of St. Charles, named for St. Charles Borromeo, Archbishop of Milan, because of the great care he showed during the plague. Most civil authorities fled, seeking safety; St. Charles declared he had to stay with his flock, ministering and leading efforts to protect people from the plague, to bring healing, to bury the dead, to console those who lost loved ones. He did not, as piously romanticized versions would have it, put himself and his clergy at risk. Rather, he put in place a sixteenth-century version of "social distancing" with crosses erected outside churches so people could view Mass from a distance, or from their homes, the basilicas and parish churches closed to congregants; the 1500's version of video-streaming the Mass, I suppose. Even with these precautions many priests did administer the Last Sacraments to the dying, and indeed many did contract the contagion and die.

In Northern Italy today more than 80 priests have died from coronavirus. Most were old or had underlying health conditions. The Bishop of Bergamo has pointed out this is a testament to their outreach to those in need. Most got the disease before the real risks were known. In the U.S. there are more than 2,000 Catholic chaplains in hospitals and nursing homes; most are deacons or laypeople, but many are priests. The sacraments and pastoral care are available in some dioceses, even in the midst of pandemic, although the Holy Father has given a special dispensation allowing prayers to be offered over video chat which have the same effect as the Sacrament of Anointing so victims and their families can be assured all sins are forgiven and heaven awaits them if they should lose their lives. Those providing spiritual care are at as much risk as other caregivers, and are bringing much needed solace to the suffering and their families, especially those on the point of death, and to family members who have lost a loved one. Thank God for their ministry; thank God they care; literally, thank God.

I've mentioned in earlier letters my concern for the homeless during this crisis; surely they are all at risk, but especially those who are older or have underlying health conditions. I've wondered what's being done to care for them. The other day I read of one example. Dr. Thomas Huggett in Chicago helped the city convert a former boutique hotel into a shelter for those most at risk. He visits homeless shelters every day, seeking out those most vulnerable to invite them to the hotel where they

can be cared for and have the best chance of surviving if they contract the virus. Dr. Huggett has given up his normal practice and is living with the homeless at the hotel. Why would he do that? What motivates him to give up an easier practice to care for the most vulnerable? Is just humanitarianism? Then I read that Dr. Huggett grew up on a farm in Wisconsin, studied biochemistry at the University of Wisconsin, medicine at the University of Chicago, then a master's degree in public health at Johns Hopkins. After a few years in Wisconsin, he joined the Peace Corps during the AIDS crisis. Then words that warmed my heart: "I understand risks," said Dr. Huggett, a churchgoing Catholic. "Everyone can't be Mother Teresa, but we can do our part based on our talents. We have to help our brothers and sisters, that's kind of where I'm coming from." His day starts at 5:30 a.m. with a meditation by a Franciscan priest and author.

There are many hardworking care providers doing what they do for a variety of reasons, most if not all filled with care for their fellow human beings; careful healers, I like to call them. Maybe there is a gene for this. But I truly believe even if there is, it takes a culture; it takes a lot of effort by a whole lot of people to cultivate and nurture this kind of humanitarianism. I call it social infrastructure that promotes caregiving. Christian faith and the ministry of priests and others may not be the only way this is created and sustained, but I do know, and I truly believe that it is an indispensable means for creating this kind of culture; for planting the seeds of caring through what is taught, what is preached about, and what is modelled by those given special roles of leadership and teaching in the Christian community and in society. That's why I believe so strongly in what we do here at St. Mary's, in what you as seminarians are preparing to do for the rest of your lives as priests. Folks like Dr. Huggett hear the Gospel proclaimed and preached while they are growing up. They are taught about Jesus and his care for others, about Christians and saints throughout the ages and all they have done to care for others and to bring healing presence to their lives. That's why it's so important that we do what we do here, preparing you for what you will do for the rest of your life. Not always, or even often on the front lines of crises; but always on the front lines of formation: forming Christian consciences; fomenting Christian hope, determination and perseverance; shaping a humanitarian worldview, a particularly Christian humanitarian worldview, inspiring those who acquire it to the kind of quiet heroism we're seeing all around us today on the part of caregivers in the U.S. and across the globe. The kind of heroism that begins with seeds planted in Church, in catechism class, in CCD, in a lifetime of practicing the faith and receiving the sacraments, provided by those who dedicate their lives to ministry, in particular who dedicate their lives to ministry as priests. Formation not only of priests, but of Christian communities that foster care-filled caregiving: careful healers.

*Carefull is the archaic spelling of "careful", which I use intentionally to connote "full of care for others", rather than just "cautious".

