

Truly to Love

In our community that is a mere morning's drive from Mexico, the ominous forebodings carried by the H1N1 virus — better known as swine flu — sped through our community faster than the morning commuters to Austin. We haven't seen so many masks around here since the James Gang dipped into the south country. The natural food store experienced a bonanza of sales as people swept up armloads of homeopathic concoctions. Translucent hand sanitizer appeared on every desk, even as nervous grunts and oriental bows replaced handshakes.

One mother accused me of trying to poison her boy with Holy Communion. Scores of extra cots were set up at the children's hospital. Every clearing of someone's throat was followed by an immediate "It's just an allergy," with everyone in the room holding his or her breath until the admission.

Precautions are good. Emergency preparations are important. Yet Christians have to be careful, lest we forget the well-being of others.

Faithfulness is foundational for Christians. However, the faithfulness of a parish is judged not so much by what we do for those we know but for those whom we don't know or don't agree with or find disagreeable. Never is the true character of our Christian witness illuminated so powerfully as during times of calamity and fear. The winds that blew in Hurricane Ike, those that propelled the swine flu, and those that swept across General Convention in Anaheim, carry with them not only threat but opportunity for the parish. The preeminent challenge to our fidelity is whether Christians shut down or open up.

On Monday of that first week of the initial swine flu outbreak, I was carrying around my own truckload of fear when I was invited into the close quarters of an Alzheimer's facility. The wife of one of the residents requested my company on the 20-mile drive to visit her husband. The two of them will soon celebrate their 57th wedding anniversary.

We arrived during lunch. The scent of meatloaf wafted through the gray metal security door to greet us. Once allowed in, I spied the residents seated at each table with terry cloth light blue bibs tied tightly at the necks and extending almost to the knees. A few could still manage a spoon, but most held their arms motionless at their sides, while they opened their mouths like baby birds to receive the next spoonful from a caregiver. I counted three who refused a single bite of anything — save the banana pudding. (Sweet is the last taste sensation to go — thank God!)

Several of the residents were attended by their spouses. Each bite was rewarded by an encouraging word or smile, while their consorts stared back at them blankly. They no longer recognized their beloved. These spouses would run a few errands after lunch, take a short nap, or read a book,



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only to return to feed supper to the ones who no longer know them. The painful routine would begin again the next morning.

The lady I accompanied said, "Pat, he may not know me, but he lets me hug and kiss him. That's enough."

The mature Christian knows that it is *enough* to extend love — expecting nothing in return. The mature Christian community knows that it is not *enough* to love only those who are on the inside. Loving the stranger and estranged lavishly is the transformative breeze that sweeps across the parish.

Loving in this lavish way is also messy, and it is anything but abstract. Christian love must be expressed concretely. The cross that hangs above the altar constantly reminds us of that. Thomas Merton often commented on how Christians express love for the Church but fail to love the people who are drawn to her.

There is a "romantic" tendency in some Christians — a tendency which seeks Christ not in love of those flesh-and-blood brothers and sisters with whom we live and work, but in some as yet unrealized ideal of "brotherhood." It is always a romantic evasion to turn from the love of people to the love itself; to love people in general more than individual persons, to love "brotherhood" and "unity" more than one's brothers, sisters, neighbors, and associates. (Thomas Merton, Disputed Questions)

In the midst of the present calamitous fight within our own communion, we would be wise to seriously regard Merton's words. Do we only show love to those who have a certain pedigree, position, or disposition? Really now, if we love only an ideal, do we really love at all? I often challenge the congregation I serve by asking, "If agreement is a prerequisite for love, how do we deal with our adult children?"

To get much more personal, St. Paul tersely puts it this way: "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). Those 17 words are the linchpin of the gospel. When we did not even know God, Christ loved us with a love that has neither floor nor ceiling.

May we catch a little of that.

Our guest columnist is the Rev. Patrick Gahan, rector of St. Stephen's Church, Wimberley, Texas. This is the second in a series of personal reflections on the life of a priest.