

The Gift of a Praying Parish

This story is about the gift of prayer, on an ordinary day, in an average Sydney parish. I present it here through the eyes of the parish priest who related it to me.

'One Sunday afternoon the local hospital phoned looking for a priest to anoint a dying woman. Upon arrival I found the elderly woman unconscious, or perhaps asleep. No one was at her bedside. I always prefer to anoint people in the company of their loved ones, so I sought more information at the nurses' station. Little was forthcoming. The woman had just arrived from another ward and none of the staff seemed to know much about her. A quick look at her file showed there was no family, the executor of her will listed as the only contact. "I don't think she speaks English," added the nurse and, as if to accentuate the woman's isolation, she couldn't pronounce her unusual surname. This woman, Maria, was alone in the world.

'Equipped with this meagre information I returned to Maria's bedside. Leaning over her I spoke to her quietly. "Maria, I am a Catholic priest and I am here to say some prayers for you." As I took out the oils and pyx and opened up the ritual, I noticed the signs of physical care - the clean bed covers, the drip in her arm, the water jug and glass sitting neatly on the bedside table. In a clinical sense everything had been done for

her, and yet this woman wasn't known. I paused to take in the situation. Maria was someone's daughter, perhaps also someone's wife and mother. And yet at this moment, I - a complete stranger - was "church" for her. I felt inadequate, and not particularly "spiritual". There we were, just the two of us. Alone.

'But then something shifted. As I prepared to celebrate the sacrament, I thought of my parish. Hundreds of people had gathered for Sunday Mass that very morning. In fact, Maria and I were not alone at all, for I carried with me the love and prayers of a whole parish community. I imagined all of us gathered around her bed. Later I would ask parishioners to pray for her, but even now, having just celebrated the Eucharist with them, I felt their presence. What a grace! I verbalised something of this to Maria, assuming she could hear me, although it was unlikely. Then I anointed her and blessed her with the communion host.

'Afterwards I sat there for a moment, staring out the window. Part of me said, "How sad, this is a person's life". Yet another part said: "How precious, this is a person's life! And what a gift to be priest for her at this moment." Again I leant over Maria and spoke to her quietly. "I'll go now, Maria. And I will ask the people of our parish to pray."

'Maria died the next day. I spoke about her in my homily the following Sunday, describing how the gift of our parish prayer life was shared with a lonely, dying

woman. I wanted the people to know that they had made a difference in Maria's life, that they had been at her bedside, that their presence at Mass has an impact far beyond fifty minutes on a Sunday. Later, a number of parishioners told me that they would pray for Maria. One woman said, "If there is anyone like that you want me to visit, please let know." As it happened, I was able to call on her the very next day for a resident at the local nursing home.

'In fact, it seems that Maria's story has evoked a faith response from quite a number of people. Through our brief encounter Maria has gifted us with a deeper sense of community, she has called many to prayer and some to new steps in ministry. How wondrous this mystery of communion, this gift of church, that we can touch one another through Christ's body, in ways we could never do alone. Please pray for Maria; no doubt she is praying for us.' •

