

## Easter people

They are people of prayer. Mystics, even. Among them you will find examples of heroic faith, people saying the rosary through the night, spiritual offerings made for the world. Who are these people? Contemplative monks? Cloistered nuns? Rather, they are people living in our own parishes; those faithful parishioners who find themselves housebound by age and illness. Physically their lives are limited, their days numbered. Yet the poverty of their bodily limitations does not prevent them from offering a spiritual wealth of faith and hope to the world.

Such is the view of Fr Phil Kurts, a Jesuit priest with a special mission to the elderly who are restricted to their homes. At the invitation of a parish, and working with the pastoral associates, he will typically spend two to three weeks visiting housebound parishioners, talking with them, offering the sacraments, celebrating Mass if they so wish, sharing a prayer and a 'cuppa'. It is a ministry that has been readily welcomed by parish priests who, struggling under an ever-increasing workload, find themselves less and less available for extended home visitations.

This mission of pastoral care, which began in 1998, is not a specialist ministry of counselling or healing. As Fr Phil himself points out, he has done no formal course in such areas. What he brings is his

person and his priesthood, and the gift of time. Having recently entered his eighties, Fr Phil sees his retirement years as a fresh opportunity to offer a service of pastoral care. His concern is to give people as much time as they need. This is not an outreach of scheduled half-hour appointments, but simply 'being there' as a loving presence for each individual, and being prepared to receive as well as to give.

Fr Phil expresses his admiration for the people he visits, struck by their qualities of acceptance, gratitude and prayerfulness. 'A woman will be sitting there, her mind as sharp as a tack, her body confined to a wheelchair for the rest of her life, and she will say "God has been good to me, Father." Another, equally disabled, will thank God for the beautiful view from her window, or the cup of tea we are sharing. Such gratitude, such an awareness of God's gratuity even amidst suffering, is a mark of holiness.'

Impressive, too, is the faith and devotion of those who tend the needs of the elderly. A husband who cares for his bed-ridden wife, himself not a young man, asked Fr Phil to 'Please pray for my wife. And pray for length of life for me, so that I am able to look after her all her days.'

Fr Phil's ministry has taken him into the homes of people of all walks of life, from public housing with damp walls and peeling paint to the mansions of the rich. 'Suffering is a great leveller,'

he remarks as he recalls the comment of a dying man who, although surrounded by material wealth, said gratefully at the end of a visit, 'It's good to know I'm not forgotten, Father.'

'Many of these people have profound prayer lives,' says Fr Phil. 'Some I would describe as mystics. They have been walking with the Lord all their lives and have a deep consciousness of grace. They also have an instinctive sense that their suffering is somehow redemptive. Pope John Paul II's letter on *The Christian Meaning of Human Suffering* is beautifully articulate on this point. "Those who share in the sufferings of Christ preserve in their own sufferings a very special particle of the infinite treasure of the world's Redemption, and can share this treasure with others." (n.27) I believe that's the heart of it.' •

