

Hospital chaplains gladly face personal risk as 'last responders' to dying patients

The call came from the intensive care unit at the University of Alberta Hospital. The patient had a presumptive case of the COVID-19 virus. He was hurting in body and in spirit. And he was alone.

The nurses asked Sister Pilar Valdes, the hospital chaplain, not to go inside the patient's room. No family were present, in part because of restrictions to prevent the virus spread. Just pray outside the glass door. And then, in midst of a busy hospital floor, there was a pause.

"I prepared myself for prayers and I noticed that everybody was getting quiet," recalled Sister Valdes, a member of the [Ursulines of Jesus](#).



Sister Pilar Valdes

"All the nurses, doctors and even the person who was cleaning outside went quiet and bowed their heads. We were one at that moment praying for that person and also for the family, because that person was all by himself," Sister Valdes said. "I was amazed by the reverence of the staff. Everyone was in silence for a moment. That moment was very sacred. I believe that all of us were just one

"We see over time that people heal, not only in their body but in the spirit side of them."

As of May 19, 33 new cases of COVID-19 were reported for a total of 1,004 active cases in Alberta. The Alberta government reports there have been 125 deaths from COVID-19. Sixty-one people are in hospital, eight of them in intensive care.

Those hospitalizations have put hospital chaplains on the frontlines of response to the pandemic. We know the first responders – police officers, firefighters and paramedics – who act when the body needs healing in a crisis. Chaplains are the first responders to the healing of the spirit. And they are the last responders when a patient is dying, providing them with prayers, comfort, or the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.

COVID-19 has changed hospital chaplains personally and professionally.



Rev. Jim Corrigan

“There’s not, in my lived experience, been anything like this,” said Rev. Jim Corrigan, who has been doing hospital chaplaincy work through his 16 years as a priest, including during the SARS crisis in 2008.

Sister Valdes sees the COVID-19 crisis as a teaching moment.

“I think it’s a big experience for all of us as people,” she said. “After this, we’ll have a new world. We’ll know how to take care of the other in a more conscious way. I think it’s a big lesson that I’m learning and the whole world is learning.”

In preparation for the pandemic, the [Archdiocese of Edmonton Office of Pastoral Care](#) assembled and dispatched an on-call team of seven priests for chaplaincy work at the hospital, in addition to religious sisters, lay people, and permanent chaplains.

Each of them – including Archbishop Richard Smith – received training not only in personal protective equipment and COVID-19 protocol, but also preparation for what they might encounter when they walk through the hospital’s sliding doors.

The University Hospital has patients with COVID-19, but the number isn’t public for privacy reasons. Like anyone in the hospital setting, the chaplains follow protocols of distancing, sanitizing, and wearing a surgical gown and facemask, depending on the patient.

The chaplains are there to provide spiritual healing as part of a team, that includes God Himself.

“I trust. I’m a woman of faith. I’m a consecrated woman. I’m a Sister because I believe that God is with me,” Sister Valdes said. “I never go to work by myself. God is with me. I let my patients know that God is with them. God will never abandon them. God is journeying with them in their struggle, in their loneliness now that a patient is not able to have their family here. We are the face of God there.”

The chaplains talk to patients. They pray with them. They listen to their stories and they are a compassionate presence, if only for a brief time. Sometimes they arrange for phone calls with family. Especially in the time of COVID, when visitors are barred, there’s palpable fear and anxiety – and loneliness.

“It’s the fear that all of us have, but now especially, the families are not able to be with the people. They’re struggling with a lot of loneliness and that brings a lot of emotion,” Sister Valdes said. “People talk. People cry. I can see that not having a family member there is quite sad, but they understand it’s for the well-being of all of us, themselves and people who work in the hospital.”

The chaplains say their healing remedy is the hope that God provides even when they’re sometimes asked the tough question: Where is God in the middle of this worldwide crisis?

“I make them feel that God is not in the bad. God is always in the good,” Sister Valdes said.

“God will help through this journey, but it’s our biological body that’s not working. Something is wrong. In this time of pandemic, this is not part of what God has done. We bring the hope and the healing that God brings, the spiritual healing that people really need. I try to put people close to God. He’s not the God who is so distant, so far away. He is in our struggle.”

Chaplains must be prepared to take personal risk whenever they enter a hospital, but especially now.

“I need to be careful for myself but also for the people that I minister,” said Sister Valdes, who moved out of her home at the Providence Centre to reduce any risk to the aging sisters who also live there.

“That’s kind of my worry every day that I’ve been working in the hospital, even before COVID, that I’m able to transmit germs to other people. But now I’m more conscious of it.”

Father Corrigan has found that COVID-19 has added a different dimension to pastoral care.

“With the precautions required, it just has taken on a little bit more of a poignancy,” he said. “I think the blood pressure is up a wee bit, or the heart rate perhaps, when you’re walking in because you’re not sure what to expect.

“I don’t want to meet the Lord this afternoon, but I’m prepared to ... I just want to go with my boots on. Being a part of this team has not heightened my fear or anxiety level. It’s created more awareness. When you go into a hospital, it doesn’t have to be COVID that can get you.”

The chaplains have to answer a series of screening questions about their health each time they arrive at the hospital.

“It kind of feels like you’re going through an entrance exam,” Father Corrigan said. “But all of that is essential. I would say slightly elevated anxiousness, but only because it’s different.”



Visitors to the University of Alberta Hospital have been restricted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

COVID-19 has changed spiritual care of patients not only when they're sick but also when they're dying and ask for the Anointing of the Sick. Hospital restrictions mean that priests can only attend in near-death circumstances. Nothing that goes into a patient's room can come out. The prayers are written on a slip of paper that's left behind. And instead of a stock of oil for the anointing, the oil is at the end of a Q-Tip.

"The efficacy of the sacrament hasn't changed at all, but the way we administer it has been tightened up pretty much," Corrigan said. "It's one of the most important ministries that a priest can be involved in, because very often you're involved with people at a very vulnerable stage in their lives."

Each call is cloaked in grief. And COVID-19 restrictions can mean that a patient is in the hospital dying without family, and only a priest present to provide Anointing of the Sick. Beautiful and painful, it's Father Corrigan's favourite sacrament.

"It's hellish. It's hellish, I would say, for those who are experiencing the loss," Corrigan said. "But for them to know that they're in a state of grace, that is a gift. At the end of the day, when we're finally taking our last breath, the one relationship that's important is our relationship with the Lord. The Anointing of the Sick, the sacrament, is in my estimation perhaps the most beautiful gift you can give someone."

Years ago, Father Corrigan was the celebrant for back-to-back masses at 5 and 7

p.m. in different towns. Just before the first one, a patient at the Wetaskiwin Hospital called for the Anointing of the Sick.

“As the Lord as my witness, he took his last breath as I finished anointing him. For me, it just said he was waiting for the sacrament so he could go. That’s why it’s such a graced ministry, because you’re able to be a very intimate part of people’s lives when there’s a vulnerability like no other.”

Amid the COVID-19 crisis, the call for chaplains as the “last responders” is as critical as at any other time.

“I have the opportunity to bring hope and grace to this individual, to this family, and that’s the blessing here,” Father Corrigan said. “It’s not us. It’s that we can bring the Lord to people at the most difficult moments in their lives.”