



About the Author

Thanks be to God and the Church Pension Group, I am happily retired after serving the kind people of the Church of the Redeemer, Midlothian, Virginia, as their rector, and before that, working in the business sector. Retirement has been a time of reflection and a time when I can enjoy a daily swim, puttering with an old sports car, reading novels, Scripture, and history, being entertained by two dogs and a parrot, enjoying my grown son and daughter, but, best of all, just hanging out with Susan, my sweet spouse of 37 years.

About Vintage Voice

Vintage Voice is a monthly publication written by beneficiaries of The Church Pension Fund. We hope you enjoy these articles and find them helpful. Articles are published with the authors' permission. If you have a reflection about your life in retirement, consider writing for the Vintage Voice! Send your submissions to vintagevoice@cpg.org.

VINTAGE VOICE

Thanksgivings for joys experienced in life

By the Rev. Dr. Stephen P. Cowardin

Many times over the past 22 years I have, as Paul would say, “boasted” about the Episcopal Church’s teaching on Grace; God’s favor towards us, unearned and undeserved, and the Church’s joyous celebration of Jesus’ Easter promise to raise up on the last day all those who believe in Him. Yet, while certainly lovely, I found there to be a gap in the Church’s prayers “Ministration at the Time of Death” (BCP 462ff), and for those who are terminally ill. What, for instance does one say when called to the bedside of someone “who won’t make it through the night” only to realize that person probably has many hours or even days left to live. Also, many people have difficulties relating to litanies such as the one found in the prayer book under “Ministration at the Time of Death.”

With this in mind, my quest to close the gap was guided toward prayers that would be flexible enough to offer not only forgiveness and acceptance, but also a greater sense of hope and peace for the dying and their loved ones. Oddly enough, I found both of these possibilities in the ancient Roman rite of Extreme Unction aka “the Last Rites” with its heavy emphasis on sin. Until the 1960s, it was their signature prayer for the dead, the dying, and, on occasion, the very sick.

Most Episcopalians today are familiar with healing and anointing in their churches. It should not be too great of a stretch for them if an anointing service like Extreme Unction was redirected to include thanksgivings for a dying person’s works, and joys, as well as shortcomings. How would the officiant know which good works were done or joys experienced? Easy, if the person were a good friend. Otherwise interviews with family and friends would be needed; but how would that work?

Leave it to the way God works. I wasn’t given much time to work out the details. George, a dear friend of mine, called to tell me his wife, Mary, was in hospice and having a terribly difficult time dying. Would I come over and pray with her and the family? The drive to the hospital offered a time to think fast and pray intently for inspiration. I had visited Mary several times before and understood

her difficulty. She just could not be convinced that she was worthy of the promise of Easter. Death, therefore, was quite frightening for Mary.

Once there, I went directly to her room where I found George and family totally distraught and Mary almost unrecognizable. I ushered George to a family conference room to pray and talk. Upon hearing more about Mary's phobia, I realized it was time to try something new. I told him about the anointing prayer; and that it had not been used yet, but had the potential of helping Mary cross over to the other side. At that point he said he was willing to try anything. After giving him a more detailed overview of what would later be called an "Anointing with Prayers of Thanksgiving at the Time of Death," I began the interview asking him about Mary's favorite places, things to do, accomplishments of which she was most proud, her joys and her sorrows, etc. After an hour, it was time to pray with Mary.

Her room was filled with a brilliant evening sun. Yet Mary's face was that terrible cancer grey, her breathing sporadic. She gave no response to my greeting as I moved close to her bedside. Family and friends gathered around us. I began by laying hands on her head and anointing her forehead, while praying aloud a general healing prayer, "Mary, I anoint you and lay hands on you in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, beseeching Him, to bring you healing and the peace you so desperately seek..." I then moved to the eyes, anointing the lids and praying aloud, "We give You thanks, Almighty God for these eyes; for all the wonders of Your creation that she has seen, for the ocean and mountains, for the first time she saw her sweet George...we give You thanks, O Lord." Moving to the ears, I anointed the one that was visible, praying, "Lord, we give You thanks for all the wonderful things she has heard with these ears, for those powerful arias she enjoyed (she was an opera fan), for the sweet babble of her babies' first words, for the sweet song of the birds outside...we thank You, O Lord." "For these arms...for all the times she has rocked her children to sleep in them and those special times when she held George tightly in a loving dance...we thank You, O Lord." Similarly, anointing her nose, "for those fragrant flowers, for the earth after a good rain... We give You thanks..." Moving to her lips, "For those words of advice given to her children, for George's sweet kisses, for singing God's praises..." Then her hands, legs, and feet. We then offered a general thanksgiving, for her loving ways among us, her many acts of kindness to us and to others. Her family and friends joined in offering their own thanksgivings and intercessions. Finally we prayed for Mary's joyful entry into God's kingdom surrounded by His holy angels and saints. At the final "Amen" her face went from grey to a brilliant pink, her eyes opened slightly and she ever so softly mouthed, "Thank you." Then Mary, Saint of God, slowly shut her eyes and joined that eternal chorus of praise, "Alleluia. Give Praise to the Risen Lord! Alleluia." George, himself a retired clergy person, gasped, "It's a miracle, a miracle."

The anointing prayer has been offered many times in the past decade. In many cases the dying do not respond, others smile, and only a very few die in the same way as Mary. For those who have already been embraced by death when anointed, their family and friends usually tell that it brought them great comfort and peace. Those who witnessed that last smile from a dear one speak of an inner peace beyond all expectations.

"Alleluia, He Is Risen. The Lord is Risen indeed."



19 East 34th Street
New York, NY 10016
www.cpg.org