

# A Priest and His Church.

## *A Testimony of Gratitude*

By Patrick T. Twomey

I loved every minute of being a parish priest, loved the distinct character of the three parishes I served, and all the individuals who were unfailingly new to me, fresh in their uniqueness and immediate splendor. I cherished the sacraments, and was humbled and delighted by the challenge of preaching. I never took for granted the sacred moment when someone invited me into the chamber of their deepest joys or sorrows, or simply sought my counsel. It is an intensely sacred life. And because priesthood is a deep attentiveness to human mystery and human behavior, it is also and very often a joyous, happy, and humorous life. How wonderful. But that's not the story I'm telling.

The happiness was and is real, but there was an undercurrent of deep and enduring trial and grief and despair in my life from which I could not escape and to which I was morally fixed by vows and love. Looking back, I see with increasing clarity not the love I gave but the love I received, not the help I offered but the saving assistance of a saving church and its good people.

A Gerasene demoniac, newly clothed in his right mind, wants to follow Jesus, begs to join the crowds that march with him. But Jesus sends him away: "Go home to your friends and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you and how he has had mercy on you" (Mark 5:19). So, the man liberated from legions went out and sowed the Word. "He went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone marveled" (Mark 5:20).

I have marveled too, at the demons in my mind, and the healings I have received over the years, from a hidden ground of love, as I trust; but it's no less true and important to say that I have often been pulled from the brink of mind-warping madness by the inner workings of an institutional church — in my case, the complex beauty called the Episcopal Church. In matters of life and death, I found her to be a wonderful and sacred mystery, a lifeline to hope, and a practical help. This is a short story, as truthfully and briefly as I can tell it.

Just before my graduation from seminary in 1986, our daughter Allison was born. The stress of her entry into the world was followed immediately by a gasping wheeze in her small voice. Something was wrong. In the days to follow, as more and more distressing guesses and diagnoses were rumored to us and around us, our world collapsed, receded until we felt only tears and nothingness and the agony of love and loss. After three weeks in intensive care, after endless tests and so much pointless speculation, our new baby went home with us. She breathed through a tracheostomy tube, which required frequent suctioning, was fed through a nasogastric tube, and showed evidence of comprehensive muscular weakness. Armed with love and instinct, supportive families and many good friends, we started our new life. Still, I was deeply shaken, unsteady. I felt unemployable at precisely a time when my employment and the promise of medical insurance were critical to Allison's long-term care.

As many of my classmates were find-

ing appointments, I wondered what to do with myself, how to go on, how to present myself. Eventually, a series of fortuitous events sent me to Trinity Episcopal Church in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, for an interview with their rector, Charles Cason. He was, as I was told, looking for someone with at least five years of experience. We immediately connected on a deep level, and in spite of my inexperience he offered me a position. I tried to explain the situation with Allison. He simply advised that I take care of my family. So, I began working.

My wife, Cathy, sat in the back of church on Sunday mornings with Allison, where the loud hum of a suction machine often broke through the words of the liturgy. Her distress and, no doubt, the discomfort of others were somehow mitigated by an embracing love that we were all learning together. In those early days, I started to chart a course that would somehow work. I would do my priestly duties whenever I could, adapting my schedule as needed. I would commit my best energy to anything I had to do publicly. Otherwise, I spent a lot of time, or as much as I could, helping with Allison. These were wonderful and difficult years, years in which one parish church showed its luminous love and beauty and support. For my part, I simply did the best I could.

Five years later, having moved to another cure at St. Luke's, a small parish in Dixon, Illinois, I began work as rector. Allison's care grew more complicated and distressing after her first year. A recurring and violent illness visited every seven days, and lasted for seven days.



Half her life was hellish agony: pain, self-abuse, vomiting, writhing, and screaming. We went to hospital after hospital, including the Mayo Clinic, desperate for help. Nothing was resolved.

We grew more and more exhausted with the years — not weeks or months, but years — desperately needing a break from the mounting stress. While, of course, deeply concerned about Allison, I became concerned about our ability to go on; I worried about my wife. In a cry for help, I contacted our insurance company to inquire about respite care, proposing a four-hour period on Sunday so Cathy could attend church and have a break, and a four-hour break on Tuesday evening, a date night to protect and nurture our marriage. Unfortunately, as I learned, there was coverage only for short-term care in which the patient is likely to improve.

I then called my bishop, the Rt. Rev. Frank Griswold. I explained our situation and asked for his intervention. As it happened, Alan F. Blanchard, the president of the Church Pension Fund, was

**When she felt well Allison turned immediately to the important matters of life: dancing, singing, drawing, painting, baking, and cooking.**

making a visit to the diocesan office, and Bishop Griswold promptly arranged a personal meeting. Our visit was rushed, businesslike, and brief. He had a plane to catch and I had minutes to advocate for my family and daughter. He listened intently. Then he summarized: “You want eight hours of respite care per week indefinitely.” “Yes, I said.” “You will have it fully covered as long as you need it.” Not quite certain how policy can change so quickly, I questioned his certitude. He explained: “I’m the president of Church Pension. I have a board meeting tomorrow morning. I will explain your situation, and I will simply tell them that your

request is to be granted, period.” “I can do this,” he added. And he did. Imagine! This is a huge and complex institution doing the right thing. “Organized religion,” to use a disparaging phrase, paid for a date night for years, paid to let my wife attend church, paid a mountain of medical bills.

My longest cure, 19 years, was among the people of All Saints Church in Appleton, Wisconsin. I would serve this congregation during some of the most difficult years caring for Allison. There were, fortunately, many wonderful and bright moments of love and happiness in caring for and raising Allison. When she felt well, about 40 percent of the time, in spite of her quite obvious disabilities, she turned immediately to the important matters of life: dancing, singing, drawing, painting, baking, and cooking. She never seemed bitter. When Allison was 7, a new child and a new joy entered our life, our adopted daughter, Hannah. The day we picked up Hannah, dressed her, and drove her home was brilliant and

(Continued on page 29)

# A Priest and His Church

(Continued from page 17)

magical, a veritable river of love. All three parishes I served loved our children, openly and sincerely.

Although my work was full time and Allison's care more than full time, and although severe sleep deprivation shrouded my every moment, an idea and conviction about my priestly life occurred that I could not quite escape. It seemed to me that my pretense of handing on the Christian tradition was patently false, or at least subject to serious question, without knowledge of Latin since the vast majority of Christian literature in the West was composed in this tongue. So, overcoming my fears, I began, first at the local university, and then headed to Rome to study with a famed instructor, Fr. Reginald Foster, who served as the pope's Latinist for 40 years. Both my parish and bishop fully supported this study. Thus, with everyone's blessing, I went to Rome in 1999, and again in 2002 and 2006. In all, I spent 20 weeks studying with Reginald Foster. My parishioners blessed and supported this study, something they were free to obstruct and deny. I did this amid mind-numbing exhaustion. But I pressed on.

I grew as a Latinist and grew as a preacher. Somehow, from the abyss of my exhaustion and hopelessness and despair, and from the resources of study, and the sheer moral necessity of doing my work, I found words fit for one pulpit and uniquely suited to one community.

When Allison was 19, we succeeded in making plans for her adult life. With the help of our families, we bought a house for her and arranged for her continuing care. Coincidentally, we found a medication that would dramatically change her life for the better. The illness that defined her first 19 years of life suddenly stopped. It has returned, but only about once a year. She blossomed, loved her new life and new home. We visited her every day. The freedom and happiness we felt are inexpressible. For the first time in 19 years, my wife and I truly slept, deeply and restfully. Heaven. Hap-

piness. Long walks. Hannah is 12 and wonderful, and wickedly funny.

What next? Three years after Allison's health improved and she moved into her new home, Hannah was killed in a car accident. One moment a gorgeous, bright and funny 15-year-old, the next lifeless and gone. We got a phone call, went to the emergency room, heard what no parent wants to hear, and then fell into a staggering sorrow. I felt insulted, as if the powers that run the universe conspired to use our three-year respite as a prelude to a new and deeper hurt. I stopped working for five weeks, three of which were spent dealing with the paperwork of death and other practical matters. Eventually, feeling a need to reconnect, I went back to the parish. Parishioners were feeling their own loss and sorrow, and feeling for us too. Their absolute and utter support, their kindness and gentleness, their prayers and affections were a medicine to our souls, a shroud of love around our dead bodies. It was the worst time in my life. In all this bitter loss, the parish was perfect, absolutely perfect. My bishop, the Rt. Rev. Russell Jacobus, was as kind and good as a man can be.

More. Twenty months after Hannah's death, an aneurism in the main vessel feeding my spleen burst. I nearly bled to death, having coded three times during emergency surgery. I was subsequently diagnosed with a rare and serious bone marrow disorder called myelofibrosis, which, in turn, explained the splenic aneurism. I take a mild chemotherapy each day, go on with my life, but know that the long-term prognosis is poor. Again, my parish stood with me, as did my bishop. Five weeks after this crisis I was back at work.

Almost five years after this surgery, seven years after Hannah's death, I started having fainting spells during the liturgy. I wondered: Is it medication, the illness, both, anxiety? I started to lose my confidence, and began thinking about an early retirement. I thought and thought about a way out, when to stop

and how to stop. Finally, I wrote my new bishop, the Rt. Rev. Matthew Gunter. We met and talked. He called the Church Pension Fund. After this initial contact, most of my communication was directly with the people of Church Pension, who, having reviewed the details, immediately offered me disability retirement, the terms of which are generous beyond

**The church that has helped me, that has rejoiced in all my joy and has been brave to suffer our sorrows is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.**

what I would have expected. They did not push me, but informed me and quietly helped me discern the best course. I did not have to retire, but I could. In a word, they were trying to help.

When I announced my retirement, the parish received the news with grace and kindness. Twenty-nine years of full-time ministry was over.

How am I to speak of a church that has only helped me, that has rejoiced in all my joy and has been brave to suffer our sorrows? It is, to be sure, one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, but also immensely helpful in the ways that matter. I cannot, therefore, speak evil of her. This is a church, as I deeply know, in which one may learn the long lesson of love.

And now — again with the church's blessing — hours of prayer, hours of reading, miles of walking, daily Latin without fail, dancing and singing with Allison. Cathy works at the hospital part time, and goes to the barn whenever possible to spend time with her beloved horse, Dante. We are living. I am sipping the clear water of a rich silence, a wilderness of expansive love. Amid this love, it is not wrong, indeed duly right to say that I love the church that has so loved me and my wife and our daughters.

*The Rev. Patrick Twomey is a frequent contributor to TLC's pages.*