

The comforting presence of Christ

■ By Father Richard McLaughlin, Hospital Chaplain

Computer scientists work tirelessly in an effort to perfect artificial intelligence. The computational abilities of “super computers” already exceed the accomplishments of even the most gifted man or woman. Is the age of the android, a robot that perfectly replicates a human being, far off?

People who think deeply about these things ask some important questions. For example: “Will a machine with artificial intelligence be capable of experiencing suffering? If it cannot, can an artificial life form ever be considered human?”

Suffering is such a powerful dimension of human experience that it is hard to think of a living person who has not known profound personal pain or hurt in his or her lifetime. A man’s or woman’s sufferings are so deeply personal that one can say it is part of our very identity. Like love, suffering defines us. The anguish of each human soul makes us unique. The pains I endure are so personal that only those closest to me may be privileged to know what hurts me most deeply. Even then, one may not know another’s deepest heartache.

In the ministry of hospital chaplain, supported by your generous contribution to the annual Catholic Appeal, priests, religious sisters, laymen and laywomen provide pastoral care to the suffering in our hospitals, mental health facilities, and prisons. Just as people flocked to Jesus on their own or supported by family or friends, in search of healing and wholeness, people turn to His body, the Church today.

Ministry to the suffering means meeting someone in their most personal and wounded condition. One thing we learn in the chaplaincy is that the visible suffering – the broken bones or conditions requiring surgery, chemotherapy, rehabilitation, mental distress, etc. – is not always the deepest and most wrenching illness in an individual’s life. The deepest heartache may involve anxiety over one’s spouse, children, or a close friend. It may be an affliction of the soul, for example, the remembrance of abuses suffered or afflicted upon others. Ruptures in family relationships are often awakened during times of physical, mental, or emotional pathology.

In a hospital bed, one may confront his or her estrangement from Almighty God. Anxiety over an abandoned relationship with God or with the parish community sometimes surfaces during the hours of boredom, loneliness, and self-reflection that accompany physical illness. Anger against God may surface with the same question that plagued Job: “What have I done that God has visited such suffering upon me?”

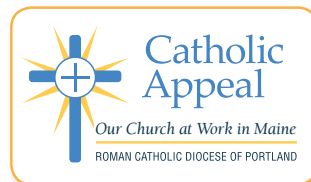
The patient, compassionate chaplain or lay minister may provide a healing presence to those who are in distress.



More importantly, we do not come empty-handed. The Catholic chaplain carries an added spiritual resource, the presence of Christ Himself. The sacraments of reconciliation, anointing of the sick, and holy Communion are powerful gifts provided by the Lord through the Church. They are truly effective signs in which the comforting, merciful, healing Christ is truly present to those in distress.

We hold up the suffering of Christ, the crucified, before those who are in pain, distress, or discouragement, those who feel abandoned and heartbroken. “Open your heart to His loving embrace and allow Him to gather you into His arms. Let Christ be your guide to the cross which is the doorway to eternal joy in God’s presence.”

The work of the Catholic chaplaincy, funded through your generous support of the annual Catholic Appeal, touches not only the lives of those who are suffering. It serves as a constant reminder to the members of our parish communities that these, your fellow parishioners, are in our prayers as our beloved brothers and sisters in the Lord. Through your kindness, this work will continue.



**SHARING
YOUR LIGHT
to give comfort
and counsel**

By supporting the Catholic Appeal, you allow priests, religious, and lay chaplains to bring the light of Christ to people who may be facing some of their darkest moments.

The appeal allows chaplains to be present in Maine’s largest secular hospitals, which serve people from all corners of the state. They include Maine Medical Center in Portland, Eastern Maine Medical Center in Bangor, Central Maine Medical Center in Lewiston, and MaineGeneral Medical Center in Augusta, which was added this past year.

Father Robert Vaillancourt, one of the chaplains serving at Maine Medical Center, the state’s largest hospital, says there are between 100 and 140 Catholic patients at the hospital every day and many more who ask to see a Catholic priest.