

Pastor Master or Pastor Servant?

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Pastor Master or Pastor Servant? No one cares how much you know, until they know how much you care! To reach people of all ages today we must be “Pastor Servant” *in*, not “Pastor Master” *of*, their lives. No one cares that you are a priest if you can’t communicate that you are a priest who cares.” (*US Catholic*, December 2008, Richard Malloy S.J.)

The topic of “Unsung Heroes and Heroines Among Us” got me to thinking that in my seventy-four years as a cradle Catholic and sixteen years as a permanent deacon, I have met and worked with countless numbers of unselfish lay men and women, priests and nuns. However, since the primary readership of the ACP are priests, I thought it best to write about a fellow priest who has always been “Pastor Servant,” *not* “Pastor Master.”

Our pastor emeritus, Father John Flavin, recently retired after 18 years as pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in Glenview, IL. He truly exemplified the term “pastor servant.” He was always available, day or night, to bring the sacraments to anyone in need at any time, or to visit any sick or convalescing person, be it at the hospital or in their home.

Ten years ago, my best friend, who was dying from ALS (Lou Gehrig’s Disease) moved into our parish in July. Because of the short time that he and his wife were in our parish, they were not known at all by Father Flavin. Six months later, shortly after Christmas, my friend’s wife called me at about 11:00 p.m. sorrowfully telling me that her husband was dying. She asked me to come and anoint him. I told her that deacons were not empowered to administer the sacrament of the sick. I suggested that she call the rectory but said “good luck,” figuring that because of the late hour it would probably go to the answering machine.

I immediately awakened my wife and we rushed to Glenbrook Hospital so we could at least say some prayers with my dying friend and his family. When we arrived at his hospital room my friend had just died, but Father Flavin was there!! He had already administered the sacrament of the sick to my friend just before he passed away. I was really impressed — Father Flavin coming to a hospital at midnight to a parishioner he did

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not even know but to a family losing a husband and a father — and he was there. My friend’s wife has never forgotten that Father Flavin was there without any regard as to who they were or their financial status.

Shortly thereafter the same thing occurred. I received a call from a friend, again about 11:00 p.m., whose mother was dying at Evanston Hospital. The friend was not actively involved in our parish, and his mother was from another parish. As before, I explained that a deacon cannot administer the sacrament of the sick, and suggested he try calling the rectory, thinking again that there probably would be no one there. My wife and I said a couple of decades of the rosary for his mother, and then decided it might be best to go and pray at her bedside. When we arrived at the hospital, Father Flavin was leaving her room, having again administered the sacrament of the sick.

Just this past Holy Family Sunday, I had finished “deaconing” Mass, and, as I walked through an empty church, I noticed a solitary woman praying. She called me over, and asked if I could hear her confession. I again explained my role as a deacon, and said I would try to find a priest for her. When I rushed into the sacristy to unvest and then try to find a priest, I encountered Father Flavin. He didn’t hesitate one moment when I explained the situation to him. When I left the church ten minutes later, he was sitting next to her in the pew, quietly hearing her confession.

When any parishioner had an operation or returned home from the hospital Father Flavin would call them every single day to see how they were doing. It wasn’t a long conversation, but it was a “how are you doing and how are you feeling” inquiry. I think he averaged ten calls each day, seven days a week. People would often incredulously tell me later “Can you believe, Father Flavin himself called to see how I was doing after the operation.” They talked wide-eyed as if Jesus himself had called them.

Father Flavin was constantly on “the go.” He was always visiting the homebound, hospitals or just quietly making the rounds of our many parish activities or meetings and just stopping by for a couple of minutes to say to his parishioners “thank you for all you do.”

These stories are just the “tip of the iceberg” about a priest who never counted his personal “time cost” when people were in need — just examples of a priest who always acted out of love, who was always Jesus for others. Father John Flavin exemplifies to me what priesthood and “pastor servant” are all about. As a priest, are you “pastor master” or “pastor servant?” ☩

