

League of
St. Gerard
NEWSLETTER

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God's Presence in Those Who Are Sick or Frail

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I stood alone on a darkened porch, knocking on the door of an apartment I had never been to before. I felt somewhat apprehensive because I had never met the person who lived there, although I had talked with him on the phone a couple times to arrange this visit. All I knew about him was that he had just returned home from the hospital, that he lived alone, and from the phone conversations I could tell there was something about him that was very likable. And I knew that he had AIDS.

It was 1989. Earlier that summer I had volunteered for a ministry program to persons living with AIDS, and Steve, whom I was about to meet, was the newest client I had been sent to. This introductory visit, usually lasting about an hour, was our oppor-

tunity to get to know each other.

I had no idea what I was in for that evening.

If Steve didn't answer the door right away I was to give the doorknob a shove and let myself in, which I did. "I'll be right there, I'm on the phone," he said. Within moments a surprisingly healthy looking young man in his twenties, with light hair and a neatly trimmed beard, warmly welcomed me with a robust handshake, and offered me a Pepsi.

We chatted awhile. Then Steve unfolded before me the story of his struggle with AIDS. When initially diagnosed, he became very angry at himself for getting into such a mess; at the world for creating the mess he had gotten into; and especially at God—who is supposed to be

good and loving and protective of all creatures. He lived as a recluse at first, but then he decided, partly out of desperation and partly out of faith, to do as much as he could for others in his situation with whatever time he had left to live.

He hoped to work with the legal system and to educate the health-care community about what persons with AIDS experience and what programs they need. He shared dreams of preparing foster parents to accept into their homes children born with AIDS. He said it didn't matter if he never received any compensation, but if his efforts could set the stage for others to get adequate care in the future, then it would be worth it.

A Gospel Life

As a professional chef, Steve ran a catering service. Once he was in the checkout lane at a grocery store with a cart full of food for a party he was catering. Because of stress over his health concerns and financial situation, his arms had broken out with shingles.

A woman ahead of him saw the lesions and shouted, "Get away from me! You've got AIDS, don't you?" She pushed her shopping cart at him, causing him to lose his balance and knock over a sales display. Again she screamed, "I don't want to get that disease from you. Get out of here!"

Looking me right in the eye he said very calmly, "I had three choices. I could run out of the store, leave everything behind, and just escape that ugly situation. Yet, I needed that food for the party. I could fight back, shove my cart at her, and let might be right. Or I could just stand there with my arms open wide like Christ's on the cross, and let her pound the nails right in." Then he said, "That's what I chose to do."

I had never heard the gospel proclaimed so eloquently: "I wish to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death" (Philippians 3:10). My one-hour visit extended to two-and-a-half hours. I have seldom been as inspired by anyone as I was that evening by Steve.

The organizers of the ministry program told me he was a deeply spiritual person who prayed regularly. In our conversation Steve said he didn't always make a big deal over morning prayer because often he really needed his sleep, but evening prayer was sacred. The phone would not be answered and the door

would not be opened while he was praying Vespers.

Later as I was leaving, climbing down the steps of the front porch, Steve stood in the doorway and thanked me for coming by. Then he added, "I'll lift you up in prayer tonight." I can't describe how overwhelmed my heart felt. I would be included that night in his sacred time with God. In his contemplation of the God who truly is good, who loved Steve very deeply, and protected him always.

Contemporary Parallels

Steve was a modern day St. Gerard Majella. We all know the many miracles attributed to St. Gerard. But we also know that he was a reject in society, like people living with HIV/AIDS often are today. Gerard tried to join several religious communities, and was always turned away. Even when he joined the Redemptorists they wanted to send him home. What would they do with this "useless Brother," this sick, frail, uneducated weakling?

But young Gerard Majella died to all of that, and the gospel for his feast day (October 16) reminds us: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). Gerard died to the self that people saw. He didn't let his sickness or his frailty get in the way of doing great things for God.

The most well-known story of St. Gerard is that upon leaving the room of a woman with a difficult pregnancy he dropped his handkerchief. As the legend goes, that handkerchief was brought to the woman, who eventually delivered a healthy baby.

A Redemptorist priest once told this true story: Newly ordained, he was called to see an elderly man who was dying. Entering the hospital room he was horrified to see so many tubes and devices attached to a human being. There was no response from the gentleman, so the priest gave him absolution and anointed him with the oils of the sick. He then prayed with and comforted the family.

The next morning he visited the hospital again. This time he was shocked to find the life-support systems gone, and the old man sitting in a chair, haranguing the nurse about why couldn't he get dressed and go home. "Well," the priest thought, "God made a wise choice picking ME to be a priest!" Years later, as he told this story, he said he finally realized God could have done the very same thing for that man using a banana peel.

Dying to Self

Yes, God could have used a banana peel. After all, we know God uses old handkerchiefs. And God uses useless weaklings. God can even use each of us to do great things, if we're willing to die to our weaknesses.

That takes great faith. St. Gerard had that kind of faith. Faith, as they say, “strong enough to move mountains.” Steve also had faith that could move mountains. When diagnosed with AIDS the doctors gave him only eighteen months to live. But Steve lived for nearly seven more years. When he died on July 10, 1992, he had survived more than five years longer than predicted. It’s because he died to those predictions. Though still alive, Steve had already died to the limitations life tried to place on him. He died to the threat that a serious infection might invade his body, because that threat would have kept him from doing good for others.

Instead, Steve came “to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection” (Philippians 3:10). Steve lived for so long because he believed in the power of resurrection, and he was sustained by that power, not relying on his own strength.

As sick and frail as Gerard Majella was, his life impacted greatly the people of his time. And the work of that “useless Brother” has continued to impact people’s lives for nearly two hundred fifty years. All because he died to himself and to his weaknesses, and he lived on the power of Christ’s resurrection.

We can never underestimate how God will work through each of us, if we, like St. Gerard and like Steve, can die to those things in our lives that seem to hold us back.

The Heart of the Matter

From California

- My husband Scott and I have been trying since our wedding night four years ago to conceive a child. We kindly ask that you will keep us in your prayers. Scott wears a medal of St. Gerard and we respectfully pray to him to intercede. We have been counseled by our parish priest. We pray that we will be content and recognize God’s will, whether or not this results in a baby for us.

From the Internet

- Please pray for our fourteen-year-old nephew, who will be undergoing a bone marrow transplant. We have already been blessed in that a donor was found on the national bone marrow register. Please pray for his return to good health, and pray for his parents and brothers that they will find the strength and faith to get through this time.
- As we come upon a year since my request to be included in your prayers, I thought that I should let you know that I am due to deliver my first baby soon. Thank you for your prayers for I know that they have truly helped me and my family. Please continue to keep me in your prayers for a safe and quick delivery and a healthy happy baby.
- Please pray for my baby to be healthy. He was born early due to medical problems and my doctors assured me he would be fine. However, since this is my first child I do have some anxiety and have been relying on the intercessions of St. Gerard Majella, St. John Neumann, as well as our precious Mother Mary. If you could please keep us in your prayers our family would be greatly in debt to you all.
- Please pray for us. We have been trying to get pregnant for nine years. We would love to have a baby to love and nurture. Please pray that a baby will come into our lives, if God is willing. Thank you very much.

Novena in Honor of St. Gerard Majella

Prayer for a Special Intention

St. Gerard, during your life you extended your help to the unfortunate and poor around you. Help me in my present need (*state your intention*). Give me the insight to recognize the presence of Jesus in the sufferings and troubles of others. Let not my urgent need for help cause me to think only of myself. Following your example, uniting my prayers and sufferings with Jesus on the cross, may I be transformed into a person of love and compassion for others. St. Gerard, pray for me. Amen.

Prayer for Help and Healing

St. Gerard, you lived your life among people who asked for your prayers and blessings in the many concerns of their lives. In your kindness, you presented their needs to Jesus and obtained an answer to their prayers. Help all those who call upon your intercession to experience the healing presence of Christ with them. Our confidence is strengthened by your words of encouragement, "Trust with a lively faith that you will receive everything from God." Be a friend to us, St. Gerard, and help us to walk in the light of Christ. Following your example, may our lives proclaim the love and mercy of Jesus in all our actions. Amen.

Prayer for a Sick Child

St. Gerard who, like the Savior, loved children so tenderly and by your prayers freed many from disease and even death, listen to us who are pleading for our sick child. We thank God for the great gift of our son/daughter and ask him to restore our child to health if such be his holy will. This favor, we beg of you through your love for all children and mothers. Amen.

Thanksgiving

Loving and caring God, I thank you for giving St. Gerard to your Church as our protector and friend. By his example, he showed us how to love and trust you. Through his intercession you have granted me the answer to my prayers. I offer you my most heartfelt gratitude for answering my request (*state your request*). Help me always to be mindful of your constant care for me. May I show my thankfulness by showing kindness and compassion to those around me. Amen.