Columns
Religious Life



Sr. Mary Catherine Redmond, left, stands with physician assistant Kristen Reichart after an operations meeting for planning at the hospital where she worked during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Courtesy of Mary Catherine Redmond)



by Mary Catherine Redmond

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There are many memories from the harrowing initial days of the COVID-19 pandemic that return to me at various times, but one experience in particular continues to return to mind as I live my daily life in elected leadership in our congregation.

As a physician assistant in emergency medicine in New York City, the early days of COVID brought many challenges; however, as the initial volume in the emergency department declined, I was asked to assist with palliative care. This consisted of iPad and phone visits with families so they could communicate with their loved ones, and gathering a patient's story from their loved ones so I could write it in the first person and put it at the patient's bed so medical staff would know something about the patient. In the most difficult circumstances, I called families to let them know that their family member was not going to survive.

George had a large family that had had their struggles, and they often were conflicted on the best care as he neared the end of his life. The team had called to let me know that it was time to gather his family; an exception we made when it was obvious patients would not survive. I called George’s family to let them know and encouraged the family to come to the hospital, to a makeshift ICU.

Phone call after phone call revealed that there were difficulties in who would make decisions and who was to be contacted. Travel arrangements were also an issue as the family was coming from all over to gather. As time passed, the team became more and more anxious as they tried desperately to keep George alive so his family could have their final moments with him. When the family finally said it would take them five hours to arrange a ride and get to the hospital, it was obvious that moment would not happen.

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I stood with the team (at least six nurses and one doctor) as George gave up a struggle that he had valiantly fought for 14 days. George died at 12:36 pm on April 20, 2020. His family would not arrive until 5:30 p.m. It was important to me that I was there for George's family when they came to view his body. It was important to me that they had contact with a person who had been present at his death. I held the story of his last moments, the staff that cared for them, the peacefulness of his death, and what his life meant to those who had met him during their care.

I waited five hours and was in the front lobby when the family arrived. I introduced myself and then walked with the family to the morgue where they would have the only view of their father, uncle, and grandfather. Burial restrictions were so strict that this was an important moment of ritual for them.

This story continues to return to my prayer repeatedly these days. As I continue to live into my role as congregational leader, exploring and contemplating our "emerging future," I realize more and more that I am the link between impending death and those left behind. More than ever, I realize the sacredness of this epic moment in religious life and the importance of being present to the dying. I also realize the importance of being present to those who continue to live and most importantly, those who will come later. My presence will convey the story of what was. My presence will honor the rituals of saying goodbye.

Above all, my presence will be the assurance of life that will continue in a different way. There will be new life in religious life. It will be very different from what I have known, but it will continue in new and different ways, if we hold sacred the waiting. My waiting for what is to come is an important step that witnesses my hope for what will be. If I hadn't waited that day for George's family, my day would have focused on his death. The waiting of that day, and the waiting of today, assures a compassionate presence to the "now" while offering the assurance, presence and gift of life that will continue in new and different ways.