

Lockdown Story 7 (Anonymous)

Most Christians will know that Jesus touched lepers and that saints like Charles Borromeo and Aloysius Gonzaga are famous partly for their fearless ministry to plague victims. Even for a Catholic priest, however, actively imitating this kind of virtue is challenging. That was my experience when a family contacted me one Saturday in May, during the lockdown, and asked me to give the Anointing of the Sick to their dying mother.

She was in a care home and her health had been declining for some time, but she had also tested positive for Covid-19. The consensus was that she had, at most, a day or so to live. Being honest, the first thought that crossed my mind was, "Will I get sick? Am I willing to risk my life?" But I was mindful of the example of Christ and the aforementioned saints. I also reminded myself that lots of doctors, nurses, carers and other front-line workers were exposing themselves to the same sort of risks every single day. I decided that I should be willing to do my part.

Of course, once I was resolved, there were some other practical concerns. The first was simply that I had to contact the home to make sure that they were happy for me to visit. They were. The other issue was that I was going to have to self-isolate for a fortnight afterward, which meant that I would not be accessible to anyone else who might need some sort of relatively close ministry in that time. The family were conscious of this too. In fact, they openly acknowledged contacting me rather than their own parish priest specifically because they were hoping that, rather than self-isolating, he would be available to conduct the prospective funeral service.

When I arrived at the home, I was asked to enter through a side door where I was met by two carers who helped me to follow all the protocols for sanitising and donning PPE. One of the lady's sons was in the room with her and told me that she had been extremely agitated until they told her the priest was coming. She could not speak but smiled and nodded as I said the prayers and administered the anointing with a cotton bud. I did get the sense that, at least, both she and her loved ones were able take some real comfort from the Sacrament. I was genuinely glad for my part in that.

A couple days later I heard that she had passed away later that evening. I had a bit of a tight chest for a few days that week, which I worried about at the time. I'm now sure it was just my mind playing tricks on me. In the months that followed, I self-isolated twice more, once because I anointed another person who was positive for Covid and the other time purely as a precaution because I visited a home where some of the residents were positive. This experience has reminded me that even people who are dying are still people who are living and who stand in urgent need of care. Without being reckless, I think we should make every possible provision for that.