



The Christian

A story: once when I was a young monk, I was assigned to care for one of the older men who lived in an "assisted living "type arrangement at he monastery. Younger men would stay with the older monks all day and all night to take care of their needs and help them with other activities of daily living. When it was time for them to sleep we would sweetly "tuck them in" and, in those moments, we were always treated with the most delicious twinkle of eyes which gazed eternal. We would quietly read the psalms to them as they slept, and would say rosary after rosary of their behalf.

We young novices noticed that while their old bodies were in one degree of failure or another, they was always a joy dancing on their faces. There always seemed to be a blink of mischievous smile sitting atop frown pained lips. They were getting ready to tie up the lose ends of life in the world while preparing to go home to their God in heaven.

One night I was assigned to a monk that I was told was suffering dearly but still had a way to go before his body "gave up the ghost." (That's how they used to refer to death.) The body holds the soul in captivity until it is too weak to hold it back from Union with the Divine Beloved. Everyone dreaded this assignment because Brother Gregory was in agony dying from cancer of his bones. He refused pain injections. It was only when Fr. Prior came to visit that would he take a shot of pain killer out of holy obedience to his monastic superior.

That night as I sat with the old brother, I heard him groan quietly from the deepest part of a man that could groan. I touched his hand and said "Father, you are so good. I will pray that God not make you suffer so much."

And as went to leave my chair to sit on his bed with him, he fought with all of his strength to raise his head to speak to me. But it was his eyes, his eyes were the all encompassing, passionate, gentle fierce eyes of a woman deep in love awaiting expectently for her beloved's touch. He thought that His God had finally come for him.

When he realized (to his disappointment) that it was not his Beloved, but his junior caretaker, he replied in voice with a strength that can only come from decades of pure faith:

"Son, you do not know the great fire of love yet. I pray not for comfort, but for endurance. I pray that my suffering makes me a participant in the Passion and Death of

Christ; if my small suffering in any way takes away one whit of what he endured for us - then I pray that I can suffer for all of eternity - burning in love for Him, My Love."

I sat down almost immobile. Every belief and thought I had about prayer, Divine Mercy, being a monastic, a priest, a Christian, the nobility of suffering and the dignity of endurance --- these all shifted like shapes in a kaliedascope. It was as if I now heard the music behind the words for the first time. It hit me as obvious as day follows night that a True Christian is not one who just follows the teachings, **a True Christian is one who participates in the life of Christ.**

That night I held and comforted the first true Christian God ever revealed to me. I encountered Christ in that frail frame of Father Gregory. A wasted body housing the heart of a spiritual lion. That night I wept and I prayed to be given the chance participate as Brother Gregory. But God had other ideas for me. And here I am. Life is my monastery. Not crosses but grocery bags!

I never got a great cross like that. The most God has given me is a bunch of overstuffed plastic grocery bags that are ready to break at any time! Not heavy like Gregory's cruel disease, but these bags need to be carried all day every day to here and there and sometimes it is very tricky trying to get upstairs without breaking and spilling God's "little jokes" all over the floor...!