

PRIESTS *in* PANDEMIC



ANOINTING OF COVID VICTIMS OFFERS SOLACE TO FAMILIES

BY MARY SOLBERG

Beth Tupek of Erie and Adam Bundy of Long Island, New York, don't know one another, but they know each other's pain: the agony of losing someone to COVID-19.

They also share a common faith that prompted both of their families to call on a Catholic priest in their moment of deepest grief. As Christians have done for millennia, they sought a clergyman to anoint their loved ones near the time of death.

Among the rituals known as last rites, anointing of the sick is a special sacrament given to those facing a serious illness or possible death. The ritual is mentioned multiple times in Scripture, most notably in James 5:14-15: "Are there people sick among you? Let them send for

the priests of the Church, and let the priests pray over them anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick persons, and the Lord will raise them up."

In the city of Erie, three Catholic priests are on call specifically to attend to the spiritual needs of highly contagious COVID patients. One of them, Father Christopher Singer, chancellor of the diocese, anointed Bundy's stepfather, Sam McKinney, at UPMC Hamot. Another priest, 75-year-old Father Dennis Martin, a part-time chaplain at Saint Vincent Hospital, anointed Tupek's father, Edward Smrekar.

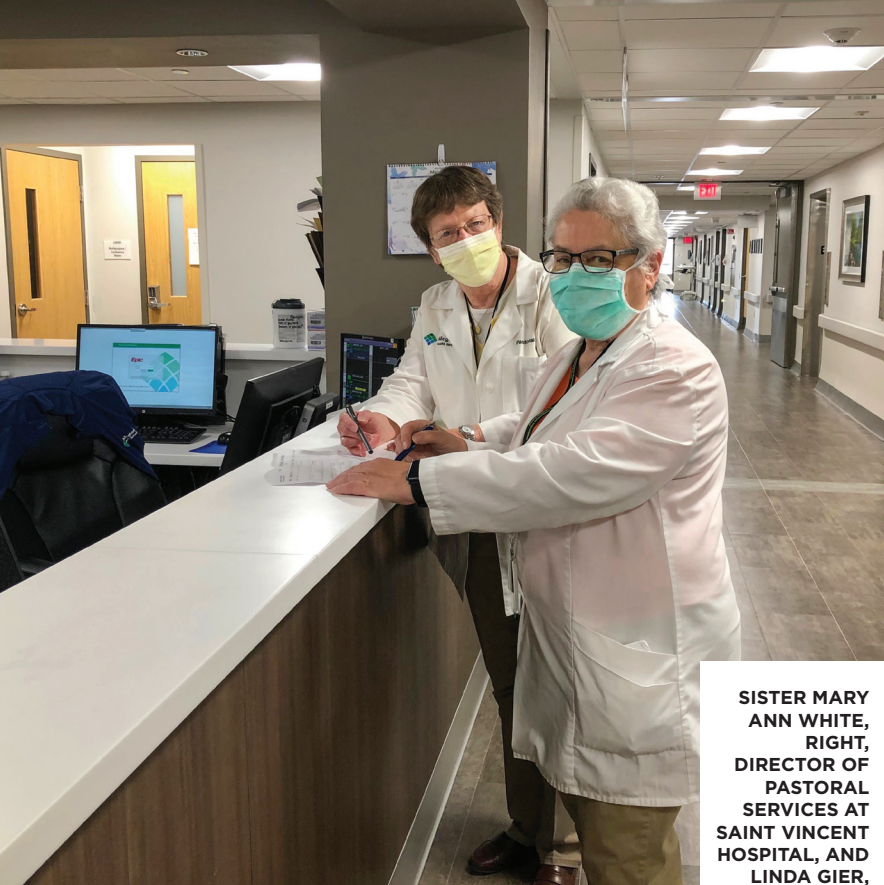
Sadly, both patients succumbed to the disease this spring shortly after being anointed.

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FATHER MIKE POLINEK, FATHER CHRISTOPHER SINGER, FATHER MICHAEL FERRICK AND FATHER DENNIS MARTIN MEET OUTSIDE SAINT VINCENT HOSPITAL. FATHERS FERRICK, POLINEK AND SINGER ARE PART OF AN ON-CALL TEAM OF PRIESTS RESPONSIBLE ONLY FOR COVID-19 PATIENTS AT LOCAL HOSPITALS. FATHER MARTIN IS A PART-TIME CHAPLAIN AT SAINT VINCENT.

PHOTO BY RICK KLEIN



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SISTER MARY ANN WHITE, RIGHT, DIRECTOR OF PASTORAL SERVICES AT SAINT VINCENT HOSPITAL, AND LINDA GIER, PART-TIME PASTORAL MINISTER, MEET FOR LONGER PERIODS OF TIME WITH PATIENTS WHO ARE NOT PERMITTED VISITORS DURING THE PANDEMIC.

“It was very comforting for me and my mother [Mary Lee Smrekar] that my father received those blessings in the anointing of the sick,” says Tupek, a member of Erie’s Our Lady of Peace Parish. “It is hard to find the words to even describe how it felt. He died later that day, so that’s what I hold onto, that he was waiting for the blessing. I’m very grateful that the priest did it under these awful circumstances.”

The circumstances of COVID-19 are unlike any the world has seen in a century. The resulting pandemic is forcing physical distancing, meaning that even family members cannot visit their sick or dying loved ones.

The only people allowed in a COVID patient’s room are doctors, nurses and, when necessary in times of anointing, a member of the clergy. Father Martin calls his experience “God’s work.”

Despite his age and warnings for people over 65 to steer clear of any compromising situations with COVID-19, Father Martin entered Ed Smrekar’s room alone on April 23. Father Martin wore full protective equipment: a gown, goggles, a face mask, a face shield and gloves. No family was present.

“I was well-protected and had no fear of walking into the room,” Father Martin says. “I did the Anointing of the Sick, said an ‘Our Father’ and ‘Hail Mary,’ and I told him, ‘Go in peace. God is waiting for you.’”

For the anointing, Father Martin wore gloves and used a cotton ball to apply the oil of the sick to Smrekar’s forehead and hands. The special container that held the cotton ball immersed in oil was appropriately discarded for safety reasons. (Priests typically use a bare thumb to apply the holy oil, but the Catholic Church allows a cotton ball to be used in cases of disease or danger.)

Father Martin says he was happy to be with a person in need, despite the potentially dangerous situation.

“The church is called to be with the people,” Father Martin says. “Even before this pandemic happened, Pope Francis said the church is a field hospital. That is more true now than ever. The church needs to be with the people wherever they are.”

Beth Tupek and six other members of the Smrekar family also contracted COVID as a result of caring for Ed Smrekar, 88, before he entered Saint Vincent. They are not sure exactly how he first became infected with the virus.

The forced separation of family members, as well as the loss of her father, Tupek says, “was awful.” Yet, nurses were able to facilitate cell phone FaceTime sessions between Ed Smrekar and family members. They communicated with him daily.

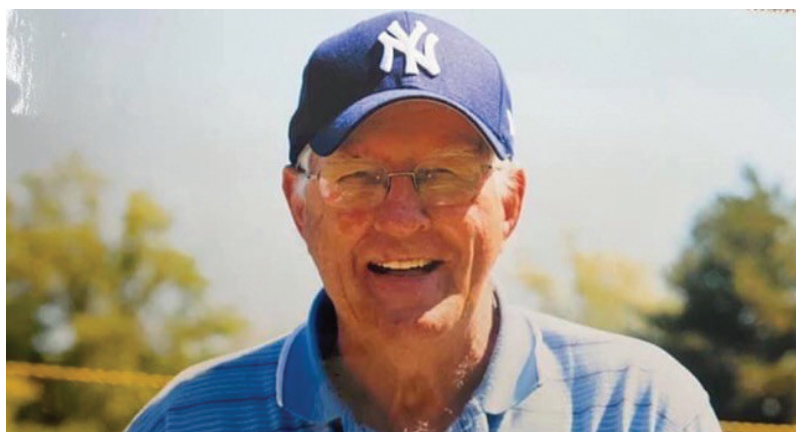
“It was sad not being able to see him in person, to hold his hand or make jokes. He had an awesome sense of humor and would relate like that all the time. He couldn’t even do that,” she says.

Pastoral care for patients and their families is of utmost concern to Saint Vincent now that such physical distancing is required, say Sister Mary Ann White, SSJ, director of pastoral services at Saint Vincent, and Christopher Clark, DO, MHA, president of AHN Saint Vincent.

As a member of the hospital’s staff, Father Martin’s presence was deemed appropriate and necessary, Dr. Clark says, adding, “We have ties to our original sponsors of Saint Vincent, the Sisters of St. Joseph, and we clearly feel that we put our patients’ spiritual needs at the top of achieving their expectations.”

Sister Mary Ann says she and Linda Gier, part-time pastoral minister, spend more time now with all patients who cannot have visitors due to the pandemic.

“You can’t heal the whole person unless you address everything — body, mind and spirit,” she says.



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EDWARD SMREKAR WAS A MEMBER OF OUR LADY OF PEACE PARISH, ERIE, AND PLAYED FOUR YEARS OF PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL WITH THE PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES ORGANIZATION BEFORE WORKING IN CONSTRUCTION IN THE ERIE AREA FOR 45 YEARS. HE DIED OF COVID-19 COMPLICATIONS ON APRIL 23.

IN AN UNUSUAL CASE OF ANOINTING OF THE SICK, FATHER CHRISTOPHER SINGER STANDS BEHIND A GLASS WALL IN THE INTENSIVE CARE UNIT AT UPMC HAMOT WHILE ADMINISTERING ANOINTING OF THE SICK ON SAM MCKINNEY, WHO DIED ONLY HOURS LATER. STANDING NEXT TO FATHER SINGER IS TRACEY TOWNSEND, WHO HOLDS A CELL PHONE ON SPEAKER SO THAT THE PRAYERS COULD BE HEARD INSIDE THE ISOLATION UNIT. NURSE LINDSAY DART IS PICTURED IN THE MIDDLE, SERVING AS AN EXTENSION OF FATHER SINGER'S HANDS IN THE ANOINTING RITUAL.

For Adam Bundy, losing his stepfather, Sam McKinney, 72, was traumatic for the family on many levels.

First, Bundy's mother, Nancy, contracted COVID and entered Kane Hospital. She caught the virus from a nurse's aide visiting the home of an elderly person whom Nancy was assisting a few times a week. Nancy McKinney is now recovered.

Her husband also got sick but was not admitted to the hospital for 14 days after his first symptoms surfaced. He was transferred to UPMC Hamot and put on a ventilator for three weeks, Bundy says.

"At 9 a.m. on May 5, we talked to the doctors and got all of the family to call Sam. Everyone talked to him with Lindsay Dart, the nurse, holding a phone to his ear," Bundy says. "We had called for a priest and at 11 o'clock he arrived."

Father Christopher Singer anointed McKinney in what he described as a "very moving ritual." It was, however, unconventional. Although Father Singer had permission to enter the hospital room wearing protective equipment, there was some concern that the gear would have to be fitted to Father Singer and ultimately be discarded.

The group opted instead to have the nurse (Dart) put a cell phone on speaker in McKinney's room, while Father Singer said the prayers of anointing on the other side of a glass partition three feet away. Dart also served as an extension of the priest's hand by using a cotton ball to place the oil on the patient.

"I was impressed with how the whole medical team there stopped what they were doing for 10 minutes to participate in this prayer," Father Singer says. "I had goose bumps when it was over. It was a beautiful thing that so many medical

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NANCY AND SAM MCKINNEY ARE PICTURED IN THIS CHRISTMAS PHOTO FROM 2019. SAM MCKINNEY, WHO DIED OF COVID-19 COMPLICATIONS ON MAY 5, WORKED AT AFFILIATED INDUSTRIES IN KANE, THEN AT THE HIGHLAND GROUP IN SHEFFIELD.

professionals recognized not only the physical dimension in the care of a patient, but the spiritual element.”

Jim Donnelly, chief nursing officer and vice president for patient care services at UPMC Hamot, calls the hospital “sacred space,” where all employees “respect and foster patients’ spiritual beliefs and heritage.”

Adam Bundy, a Catholic, wasn’t there to witness the anointing, but he believes the ritual would have been meaningful to his stepdad, who died only two hours later.

“We wanted to make sure he had everything,” Bundy says. “He wore a cross and I think it would have been very important to him that he was anointed.”

Over the three weeks that Sam McKinney was hospitalized at UPMC, Bundy and the rest of his family got close to nurse Dart, whom he described as humble.

She declined to be interviewed for this report.

“She became like a family member,” Bundy says. “After all this [pandemic] is over, I told her I’m going to come to Erie and give her a big hug.”

“IN JESUS’ TIME, LEPROSY WAS THE CONTAGION. PEOPLE AVOIDED LEPERS, BUT JESUS MINISTERED TO THEM. THAT’S WHAT PRIESTS ARE CALLED TO DO.”



Contributed photo

Beauty and inspiring lessons have now emerged from these pandemic experiences, both for the Smrekars and McKinneys, as well as for the priests called forth in this unprecedented time.

While the pandemic continues to ravage people’s lives, Bundy says he has turned to sharing his nature photography on his personal Facebook page and the Shelter Island, New York, Facebook page.

“I have always loved taking pictures, so since all of this happened it pushed me to give people a second or two of seeing something beautiful instead of being hit by all of the hard things going on in the world right now,” Bundy says.

Tupek, who is overcoming her own case of COVID, wants to donate her plasma once she fully recovers. Two members of the Smrekar family already have donated their plasma, which has been deemed medically useful to seriously ill patients.

“It’s so crazy. It’s so sad, but you just try to have hope that this [pandemic] is going to be over,” Tupek says. “I will donate my plasma to honor my father. I wish we could have done that to help him, but if we can help someone else, then that will be great.”

Two other priests on the special COVID ministry team, Father Michael Ferrick and Father Mike Polinek, have not yet been called to do an anointing of a COVID patient. Yet they are inspired by the ministry of their brother priests, Fathers Singer and Martin.

“In Jesus’ time, leprosy was the contagion. People avoided lepers, but Jesus ministered to them. That’s what priests are called to do,” says Father Ferrick, who also serves as rector of St. Peter Cathedral, Erie.

According to Father Polinek, diocesan vocations director, priests — like firefighters battling a blaze — must act with courage and strength. He adds, “When a priest is called, he has to be ready to go in and do whatever people need.” †