

INTER-RELIGIOUS CHAPLAINCY

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My friend, Mr. Prakash Mody from Toronto, Canada recently sent me an e-mail letter with many questions about hospital chaplaincy. He requested me to give him a detailed answer to all his queries. "We are working on a project for 'diversity in chaplaincy' ... I am required to provide some information about chaplaincy in general and non-Christian chaplaincy in particular," Mr. Mody wrote.

I have had a little experience of chaplaincy as a substitute chaplain in a big hospital in New York in 1977. I have also some experience of visiting the prisoners in Sabarmati Central Jail at Ahmedabad. I also participated in the voluntary social services of St. Xavier's College, Ahmedabad by visiting the patients in Civil Hospital once a week for four years.

Still I did not feel sufficiently informed to reply to Mr. Mody. So during two weeks time I studied the subject searching in the internet and reading a book about chaplaincy. Then, to my luck, my cousin brother Fr. Mathew Vellankal, the Pastor of Holy Spirit Church at Fremont, California, made an appointment and took me to meet a well known hospital chaplain, Fr. Geff Finley. He also introduced me to another full-time chaplain, Fr. Johnson Abraham.

During my travels after the World Congress of the International Catholic Union of the Press (UCIP) at Sherbrooke in Canada, I was lucky to meet Fr. Lawrence Culas also. He is a visiting chaplain in Mercy Fitzgerald Hospital at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania state.

Recently I also read a book entitled "My Life with Saints" by a Jesuit priest, Fr. James Martin, a former Editor of "America" one of the most quoted monthly magazine in America. The book is not about chaplaincy. But the author has shared his experiences as a chaplain in a prison in one chapter of the book entitled "Full of Grace". Fr Martin's narrations give a fair idea of a Christian Chaplain and his services.

Christian chaplains used to be well trained priests who were appointed to render spiritual and psychological services to various military groups, hospitals, nursing homes, counseling centres, mental health institutions, university colleges, etc.

Today the chaplaincy gained new meaning and involves many more services than before. As Fr. Lawrence told me, the chaplains now adapt an holistic approach in their ministry. So they try to know not only the patient's present and past situation but also they try to get acquainted with their family people and their history.

Here let us mainly speak about the hospital chaplains and their services in which people like my friend Prakash Mody are interested. "The goal of spiritual care is to engage the spiritual dimension of people, their belief, faith, culture, values and religious practices for healing, well-being and growth. Spiritual care services provides to patients, their families and friends, meeting individual needs according to the particular circumstances", said Fr. Lawrence.

My talk with Fr. Geff Finley was mainly about hospital chaplaincy. He is the Spiritual Care Coordinator of Washington Healthcare System. The hospital has appointed him as a full-time chaplain to the post. Fr. Johnson Abraham is also a full-time chaplain in the same hospital.

But Fr. Abraham is paid not by the hospital but the Deanery or the 5 or 6 parishes of Fremont city where the hospital is situated. For the Catholics in the area wanted a Catholic priest to accompany them in their sickness and death.

The hospital has provided offices spaces to both the chaplains where they can meet patients and counsel them in privacy in the hospital premises. They are also available for patients and those who take care of them for counseling and prayers and also administering sacraments.

In Washington Healthcare Hospital there are also 12 voluntary chaplains including Hindus and Sikhs. On certain days these voluntary chaplains are called to duty by turn. Their voluntary services are also available whenever a patient asks for one or another voluntary chaplain. But in many cases the Hindu and Sikh patients call for Catholic priest chaplains and they are happy that a Catholic priest chaplain prays over them or counsels them.

“Chaplains are available to hospital staff for emotional support, crisis intervention and spiritual and religious counseling on confidential basis”, said Fr. Lawrence.

Now lady chaplains and Muslim chaplains also are appointed as full-time, regular chaplains in some hospitals in USA. But they are required to undergo regular training in chaplaincy and obtain “Certification for Pastoral Education usually called C.P. for being appointed officially as chaplains in hospitals.

But hospitals may exempt Catholic priests from the requirement of undergoing P.C. training as they have long periods of formation in subjects like World Religions, Scriptures of different religions, Counseling and various Spiritualities, etc.

Fr. Finley told me that Washington Healthcare hospital has appointed him as Spiritual care Coordinator of the hospital without the C.P. as he was considered a very experienced and well-qualified person for the post of the hospital chaplain. He also told me that his predecessor was a lady chaplain.

The concept of Chaplaincy is basically Christian. The pastoral care of Christians throughout their life is part and parcel of Christian religion and spirituality. Today other religions like Muslims and Hindu have begun to realize the importance of the pastoral care of their followers. But generally speaking it is not common yet for the Hindus, for instance, to ask for pastoral care while they are sick and are under treatment in a hospital or at home..

On the other hand, the Christians suffering from serious sickness or in critical situation of death ask for pastoral care and Christian sacraments like the Sacrament of the sick. And even if a Christian patient in a critical situation may not ask for pastoral care, their relatives may approach a hospital chaplain or a priest for the pastoral care. In fact, the Christians have a special sacrament called the Sacrament of the Sick, This not the case with other religions.

Spiritual gurus of different religions with appropriate attitude and dispositions and with the required P.C. training can help patients in the hospitals or at homes with spiritual advice and counseling. Most patients faced with death are in need of such pastoral care and often ask for it.

Hospital chaplains can also help the family members through counseling to face serious sickness or death of a near and dear person like for instance, one's life-partner. They can also assist the patients and the hospital authorities in critical time to make ethical and moral decisions concerning questions of life and death.

Well qualified and experienced chaplains are also called for to assist the hospital authorities as a representative of the hospital in making decisions in moral and spiritual matters. Chaplains are called by their hospital to serve, for instance, as a member of the Ethical Committee of the Hospital.