

## AIDS, Nursing and Blood

As I drove home against the setting sun I knew that a chapter in Mike's life had been closed and a new chapter had been opened for me. Mike, my good friend, gave up his life of suffering for eternal glory. I came to know Mike through my ministry on the Oncology Support Team. Mike was not a cancer patient, but due to the hemophilia, in addition to AIDS, he was being cared for by one of the cancer specialists.

How did it all begin? My supervisor for the Support Team called me to ask if I could work with Mike. My question to myself, "Could I work with a person who had AIDS? Would I be afraid, did I have the courage?" I needed to answer quickly --someone was in need. I went to the hospital after I left my regular job for the day. I was not impressed by what I saw as my "new ministry." Mike was rather cool to me, in fact he turned his head toward the wall. I sat nearby. We shared silence. Eventually I was able to say, "Mike, I am here for you if I can do anything. Don't feel obliged to talk. I'll return in a few days."

My initial impression was one of frustration, but many jobs begin that way. My "job" became a "ministry" which spanned several months. It changed my life.

Mike was not a complainer, though he suffered very much. Due to the hemophilia Mike was hospitalized most of the last seven months of his life. In our frequent encounters we spoke of many things: life, death, pain, fear, and even of "getting well." My goal in being with Mike was not to proselytize but to show ordinary human care. I hope Mike felt that reaching out to him.

AIDS is a very popular topic these days. It is a frightening advance to society. It bears something of the stigma of leprosy. Would an AIDS patient rapidly confess that it is not the physical pain so much as the sense that he or she is "untouchable" that hurts the most? Mike and I did not discuss this in words. But at least between the two of us, he came to know less of the latter pain.

The disease ravages the body. If only I could read the heart and mind of Mike today, I wonder what he would say. Mike's days were long, he had ample time to think and in his own way he was praying for courage and strength. Many times I asked if he believed in prayer. His only reply, "Would I be here if I didn't believe?"

To describe the events of seven months would be a lengthy account. I would like to look only to the last week of Mike's life. Mike was losing ground with considerable weight loss, no appetite, and almost continuous vomiting. I am not a nurse and at times I wanted to run. Some days when I came to the hospital, he could not obtain nursing help as quickly as he needed it. I passed his door and heard his cry for help. I held his head, as a mother used to do when we vomited as kids. What else can you do? How can you comfort someone in such misery? I'd wash his face and hands after his ordeal.

Gradually I began to pray as I stood beside Mike's bed. My most sincere prayer was an offering of his life of pain and isolation. It was a plea to God to take Mike home. I witnessed suffering which I lack words to describe.

Due to the hemophilia, there were many blood problems involved for Mike. It was constantly a "loss of blood" -- in small amounts to the lab technician and in large quantities in other ways. As an Adorer of the Blood of Christ I have frequently contemplated the "Mystery of the Blood." My personal spirituality has translated into "the Blood which gave us life" -- and my own "giving of life" through care and compassion. To witness a blood transfusion is to witness life being pumped into the arteries of someone in need. To be aware of the mystery of the Blood of Christ is to be aware of new inner life being pumped into the system. I believe that I am called to help generate that inner Life through a spirituality that gives LIFE and HOPE. There is a feeling in my heart that part of this spirituality was transmitted to Mike.

In the last hours before Mike died, he gave his blood. It was not a pleasant sight to see blood pouring from his nose and mouth. The nurse suctioning and I was holding the hand of a person racked with pain and the loss of his precious blood. I was poignantly reminded of Jesus shedding his blood on the cross as Mike poured out his life blood in the final surrender of his body. It was an image I will never forget.

Is our generation called to the shedding of blood in this manner? Are we as religious called to minister to the people with AIDS by giving the "inner life" found in the Blood of Jesus? Who will bring LIFE to the dying, the ostracized, the untouchables? Who will stand by to see blood loss, aching limbs, hearts burdened with the pain of a rapidly spreading disease?

I believe we are called to share the Mystery of the Blood. We look to the blood of those who suffer, mingled with the Life-Blood we carry, and are graced with the power and freedom to reach out and touch and to be ministers of LIFE. Will we who bear the name of the blood also walk away as their blood is spilled?

*(Sr. Jacinta Langlois, A.S.C., "The Mystery: Michael Gave His Blood," The New Wine Press, December 25, 1992)*

In my work as a nurse, I administer blood transfusions for patients. There are so many seemingly little rules and regulations about blood transfusions that I can't begin to deal with all of them, but there are some that become metaphors in helping me understand Precious Blood spirituality and my journey as an Adorer of the Blood of Christ.

I have come to believe that Jesus is a universal donor. My guess is he has O+ type blood.

In giving blood, there are certain standards and procedures the lab has to follow. One is that the recipient's hemoglobin has to be less than 8.0 grams. Aren't we always anemic from sin, fear, grieving, pain, guilt, anger, hurt? No wonder we wish to receive the Blood of Christ every day.

There has to be a written order from the doctor to type and crossmatch the patient for enough units of blood to cure the anemia. Recall the prescription from the Divine Physician: "I tell you most solemnly, if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood, you will not have life within you." (John 6:53)

After the recipient is typed and crossmatched, he or she is tagged with a special bracelet. When we make profession as Adorers, we receive a heart and chain to wear.

The number on the bracelet is the same as the number on the unit of blood that has been prepared for the patient. The nurse has certain procedures she must follow in giving a transfusion. Blood can be infused only through a certain caliber needle, and this needle has to be in place in the patient's vein before the blood can be retrieved from the lab. Blood has to be started within fifteen minutes after it has been removed from the refrigerator. Only the nurse can get the blood from the lab, and one of the triplicate forms from the typing and crossmatching of the patient's and the donor's blood. The nurse checks the patient's number on the bracelet and writes it on the form. She then goes to the lab and asks for the specific unit of blood. The lab technician and the nurse verify all of the information on the unit of blood with the information on the triplicate form. Both sign their names and the time. "What I have written, I have written." (John 19:22)

The nurse carefully takes the blood to the nursing unit and again information on the forms is checked and verified. Both nurses must sign and date the forms as well as note the time the blood is hung to be infused. What preparations do I make to receive the Blood of Christ?

For the first fifteen minutes of the blood transfusion the nurse stays with the patient and watches for any reactions, records blood pressure, temperature, pulse, and respirations every five minutes. A reaction to the blood would be seen if the vital signs changed drastically from those checked before the transfusion. There also may be a reaction manifested by itching or hives. Do I have any kind of reaction when I receive the Blood of Jesus? Can I name it? Is it life producing?

I mention to patients during those fifteen minutes of intense nursing care to be grateful and to pray for the person who donated this unit of blood. He or she took the time from a busy day to spend the better part of an hour answering a lot of questions, feeling pain of being stuck twice, once to check the iron level of the blood and finally when the blood is given. Some donors even endure the embarrassment of fainting when they give a unit of blood.

Jesus was wounded by the scourging, crowning with thorns, being nailed to the Cross, and having his side pierced so that all could be transfused with His Blood. What is my reaction? How am I grateful?

Hopefully the patient will not have any reactions as the nurse continues to check the vital signs every thirty minutes and finally when the transfusion is completed. The transfusion must be completed within four hours or the remainder of the blood has to be discarded. How often do I encounter difficult situations during the day and invoke the power of the Precious Blood? How often do I experience joy or a special experience of God and gratefully acknowledge the power of the Precious Blood in my life?

Did you ever donate blood? When you are finished, you are treated with beautiful hospitality and seated at a table of refreshments and given instructions to eat well and drink plenty of fluids for the next few days. Then they place this

oval-shaped sticker on your shirt: "Be good to me. I gave blood today." I always put mine on my crucifix when I get home. Jesus gives His Blood in so many ways everyday. How am I living the power of His Blood each day?

*(Sr. May Maurice Loepker, A.S.C., "The Metaphor: Giving the Gift of Life," The New Wine Press, December 25, 1992)*