

FROM THE PASTOR

My dear brothers and sisters,

What sadness our parish faces with the sudden death of Fr. John a week and a half ago. I wanted to share my experience of the event surrounding his death. Wednesday, March 30 was like any other Wednesday, as Fr. John concelebrated morning Mass and worked in the Diocesan Offices. He returned in the evening and enjoyed reading the paper in the kitchen while Donna prepared dinner. At 5:15, as is our custom, we went to the rectory chapel to pray Evening Prayer together. Nothing seemed odd. Nothing seemed out of place.

After prayer, we sat down to dinner. As Fr. John meticulously prepared his salad (ripping apart his wedge of lettuce, cutting his tomato slice in half, and pouring salad dressing and pepper over all of it), he spoke about his day, and handed me the list I had given him of upcoming dates for which I needed coverage. He had just finished preparing his salad when he gave a *deep groan*. Standing up, trying to walk off the pain, he said he didn't know what was going on, indicating pain in his abdomen. I saw him start to weaken and jumped up to catch him before he hit the floor, calling to Donna, who called 911. In the eternity between his fall and the arrival of the emergency personnel, I was able to pull the holy oils out of my pocket and administer the Anointing of the Sick. Up to this point, I noticed he struggled breathing. After I anointed him, I noticed his breathing became less labored and more natural. I believe God spared him from dying right then in order to give him more time to prepare his soul to enter eternity.

The very attentive Pelham emergency personnel, assessed the situation, and brought him to Lowell General Hospital. Donna went immediately to be with him. I stayed behind in order to lead the Divine Mercy Novena – asking people to keep Fr. John in prayer. I know from there, word spread and many were praying for him. Immediately after the Novena, I went to Lowell General where I found out that he had been rushed to emergency surgery for an abdominal aneurysm. Throughout the evening and into the night, Donna and I kept vigil, praying for Fr. John, as I also kept key people informed, from the Provincial House of the Vincentians in Connecticut (his religious order), to Fr. Anthony, to Bishop Libasci and the Vicar for Priests in our Diocese. At about 9:30, an Operation Room (OR) nurse shared the doctor's concern that only about 2% of patients in Fr. John's situation survive. Donna and I fortified ourselves in prayer. We prayed for a miracle, but trusted even if God did not do *our* will.

Around 10:30, some of the OR nurses came to the waiting room and invited me to go to anoint him. Through all of this, I have to commend the incredible staff at Lowell General. They were incredibly attentive to our needs and our pain, going above and beyond the call of duty to make sure that we were taken care of. Also, throughout the evening (and the subsequent days), so many of you from the parish have stepped forward offering your help and support; I cannot thank you enough for your generous spirits!

What nervousness I felt to walk into the OR! The surgeon took me aside to explain the situation, how fragile Fr. John was, and that, while he had been able to do everything he could, the next 24 hours Fr. John would be very unstable. Walking into the OR with doctors, nurses, and operating room techs all hushed, reverently awaiting the healing touch of God in the Sacrament of the Sick – how can I describe it?! Fr. John was completely covered except for his head. I lay my hand on his head, praying quietly for healing. I anointed him with the Sacrament of the Sick – this gift from the very hand of Jesus Himself – and prayed the prayer of Apostolic Pardon – a prayer for the remission of all sin and punishment due to sin.

After about a half hour, they had stabilized Fr. John enough to bring him to the ICU. At this point (about 11pm), I went home, leaving Donna to keep vigil. At 1:40 in the morning on Thursday, March 31, Donna called to inform me that Fr. John had just died. I got up and celebrated a private Mass for the repose of his soul, entrusting him into the Merciful Hands of Almighty God. Fr. John had died within the Novena of Divine Mercy, in the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy, on a Thursday – the day of the institution of the priesthood.

At morning Mass, I announced his passing, and in my homily reminded us that the Eucharist is truly the Body of Christ; the **WHOLE** Body of Christ. The Church is the Body of Christ – and the Church is made up of the Church Militant (we here on earth), the Church Suffering (the souls in Purgatory), and the Church Triumphant (those in Heaven). With every Communion, we have Communion not only with Jesus, but with the whole Church – we are united also with Fr. John, and all of our loved ones who have gone before us and await the Resurrection! May this knowledge help us to grieve our loss, and find peace in Christ.