

THE BROTHERS IN SOUTH TEXAS IN A TIME OF CRISIS



Figure 1 L-R Marc Roque, Fr Bill, Br Semisi, Br Emmanuelle, Fr Bob, Charlie Martinez, Fr Pat

Today is Sunday, March 29, and I am writing to you from my office at Queen of Peace in Harlingen, Texas. The Brothers and I are grieving for many things not least of which is the death of our Fr. Bill Penderghast at the Valley Baptist Medical Center on Thursday, March 26.

While in retirement, Bill kept an apartment here in town. He did so because he wished to live his retirement in Harlingen where he served 26 years as parochial vicar and then as pastor at Queen of Peace. Over those years, he had developed many important relationships with people to whom he wished to remain close. An added advantage is the semi-tropical climate which is very attractive when the alternative is the long, cold winters of Massachusetts. He moved from the parish rectory two years ago after the parish was designated as the site for the Province pre-novitiate. There wouldn't be room here to house him. Living on his own did not mean that he was separated from us. Each morning he joined us for Morning Prayer and breakfast often followed by tending to parish IT needs. He also participated in our area community meetings, held twice monthly alternately at Sacred Heart in Edinburg and here in Harlingen. He was available for parish sacramental needs such as covering for the parish priests vacationing or ill, First Confessions, youth retreats, and as a consultant to me concerning property management and parish families.

Since Bill was in his late 70s, it was important to me that he notify me about absences from Morning Prayer and other activities so that I would know he was OK. On Saturday morning, March 14, he called to let me know he had a toothache but couldn't see a dentist until Monday, March 16 and that he would be absent from the Saturday evening Mass. At noontime on Monday, he joined us for lunch and advised that he had an oral abscess that was to be treated with antibiotics. The pharmacy was unable to fill his prescription until Tuesday morning, by which time he was experiencing a lot of pain, so much so that he admitted himself to the Valley Baptist Medical Center on Tuesday evening. The medical team placed him on an antibiotic intravenous drip but his condition did not improve. By Friday, March 20, the team decided to drain the abscess and tend to a developing rapid heartbeat. Over the weekend, he showed some slight improvement and the team began to talk of transferring him to a rehabilitation facility on Friday, March 27. However his condition rapidly deteriorated, he was moved to the hospital intensive care unit and intubated on Tuesday, March 24. By Thursday, March 26, he was completely unresponsive and experienced massive kidney failure and the abscess had cause his blood to be septic. Other underlying medical conditions complicated matters. The medical team and his primary care physician agreed that there was no hope of recovery and so, together with Bill's medical proxy, the decision was made to remove him from the ventilator and arrange for palliative care.

Due to the COVID-19, the hospital had been closed for visitors for some days. All this time we had been unable to visit him. When the decision was made to remove Bill from life support, we were permitted to visit. Six of us live here in the local community: Fr Pat Fanning, Brs Emmanuelle del Castillo and Semisi Pulotu, prenovices Marc Roque and Charlie Martinez and me. In pairs, we were able to visit with Bill to pray with him and comfort him. He was anointed during these visit. Later in the afternoon, our two secretaries, Janie Castillo and Laura Jones were able to visit for a final farewell. In the evening, after his medical proxy had arrived from San Antonio, Fr Manoj Nayak, SSCC and I joined him along with an Indian priest, Fr George Kerketta, who is contracted with the diocese. After our final farewells, the medical team removed Bill from the ventilator and he breathed on his own for about five minutes. He died at 7:13 CST.

In this time when all our churches are closed and the parish community can't gather, the brothers and sisters are not alone in their grief. On social media there has been an outpouring of grief and memories offering consolation and hope to the many who loved him here. It is the custom here for families to pray a novena of rosaries for the deceased. We started the novena on March 27, the feast of the Good Father, and those who are connected via social media have been praying it every night at 7 PM. Bill will be cremated on Monday and his remains will be kept here at Queen of Peace until our

churches reopen and we can celebrate his funeral Mass. After that, Bill's remains will be sent to Fairhaven, MA for a memorial Mass and interment in the Sacred Hearts cemetery.

While our churches are closed and people are observing social distancing, some parishioners are coming by to drop off their weekly offertory. One such did so yesterday and I happened to be outside. She seemed devastated and could only say that she was broken-hearted. She handed me her offertory envelope and walked briskly back to her car crying. I suspect many parishioners are similarly aggrieved by our great loss.

Loss is what we are experiencing here on so many levels. Since COVID-19 finally arrived in the Rio Grande Valley, we have, by county order, been practicing shelter-in-place. After an initial burst of panic-buying of food and supplies, things have calmed somewhat. We'd had the foresight to begin laying in supplies of non-perishable foods about two weeks before the panic began. So, we're well stocked. Our food pantry also had the foresight to buy more food than usual from the Greater Rio Grande Food Bank (at about twenty-five cents per pound). So we are able to help more people than usual although, so far, fewer people than usual have come looking for help.

Meanwhile, with the churches closed, we have been responding only to the most urgent pastoral needs. Bishop has counseled us to take great care of ourselves which puts me in mind of the Good Father who, if he were the vicar general here, might say that the moment we do so we are breaking our most essential vow. With prudence and as best we may, given the legal limitations, we are alert and responsive to needs.

There are seven professed living and serving here along with two pre-novices in the Diocese of Brownsville. We live in two communities. One here at Queen of Peace and the other at Sacred Heart in Edinburg. In addition to informal visits, we meet twice a month for midday prayer, lunch and community business. Now that we are under the "shelter-at-home" restrictions, our meetings take place by video-conferencing. There is much for us to do since we are receiving Provincial Chapter work from the preparatory commission. Our Chapter is scheduled for November 2020 and who knows, given the COVID-19 crisis, whether the Chapter will be held on schedule or, indeed, in person? Holding a chapter by video-conferencing would be an interesting experience if such a thing can take place. I wonder what kinds of permissions would be required and who would grant them? So many things to consider in these uncertain times.

If any other member or community would like to let the rest of us know how things are going with you, I think it would keep us connected and united in prayer and concern for each other.

May God love and keep you at this terrible time of great suffering and heroic goodness. May our brother Bill intercede for us from his place of eternal glory.

Bob Charlton, SS.CC.