

The Witness of One

by **Woodeene Koenig-Bricker**

It's easy to see how people like Blessed Teresa of Calcutta or Blessed Pope John Paul II were powerful and effective witnesses to the Christian message in the world. The world was their pulpit and their words and actions made headlines. When they talked about God, even presidents and kings took notice. But you and me? In our unspectacular lives? Sure, we can show the love of Christ to our family, friends, and coworkers, but that's hardly making a major impact on spreading the Gospel.

Or is it?

The greatest testimony to the faith comes not from famous and influential people but through you and me, as we face the challenges that come to us each and every day. What truly impacts the people around us? It's how we respond to things like illness, financial problems, family struggles, fear, loneliness, pain, and ultimately death. Let me share with you some of the people whose faith-filled responses have given me both courage and encouragement in my own "dark night of the soul," to borrow a phrase from Saint John of the Cross.

Sharing Comfort and Hope

Whenever I've been sad or in despair, one of the first people I turn to is my friend Ann. Graced with the gift of hospitality, she never fails to provide "chicken soup" for both body and soul. In her soft southern accent, she says just the right thing to make me believe that tomorrow will be better and that no sorrow lasts forever. Her words carry special meaning because when her daughter was barely into her twenties, she was brutally stabbed to death and left to die by a psychopathic killer who kidnapped her from the mall where she worked. I can't imagine what it would be like to identify the mutilated body of your child as it lies covered in blood in a muddy field. Ann not only did that but today is able to lend comfort and hope to those of us who suffer far less horrific sorrow. When Ann tells me that God is there, even in the middle of my pain, I know she speaks from a place of profound life experience. Her example provides me with a living model of forgiveness and resilience rooted in faith.

Sharing Joy in the Present Moment

Because I'm a bit of an Eeyore at heart, I have moments when I "regret the future," so to speak, when I project my mind forward and see the beautiful things that I will never have, the beautiful places I will never see or experience. It is then that I begin to feel a bit sorry for myself. On those occasions my friend Lauraine never fails to remind me "to take every thought captive and make it obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5, GNT). That could be just another pious platitude unless you know what lies behind her words. Her only daughter died of a rare form of cancer, her elder son married a woman who cannot have children, and her second son is gay. Lauraine, who had looked forward to grandchildren, will never have any. She admits that there are times when she could let herself feel quite morose, but she draws herself up and deliberately looks for God's blessings in her life. Her example helps me to let go of my own expectations and realize that I too can keep my thoughts from ruining my life. When she admonishes me not to let the negatives of the unknown future steal joy from the present, but to replace every bleak projection with words of Scripture, I know she's done just that herself. What's always amazing to me is that those who meet her for the first time assume that her life has been one mountaintop experience after another because of the joy of living that she conveys. Only those who know her well understand how her joy is hard-won from struggling with God's will for her life. When she reminds me to control my wayward thoughts, I know I need to pay attention.



Sharing Faith in Jesus

Then there is Marion. Married for nearly sixty years, she lost the love of her life first to dementia and then to death. When my mother died, Marion's wise counsel on how to move through the fog of grief was incalculably helpful. When I would say how lonely I felt, or how hard it was to manage each day, Marion would remind me that Jesus was with me, even in the midst of the sorrow. She talked to me about her faith in Jesus, for it was her faith, and her faith alone, that kept her going day by day through the long, slow loss of her beloved husband to dementia, the stages of dying, and then, finally, death. Listening to Marion's words, I would cling to her experience and know that if Jesus were there for her, he would be there for me as well. When I look at her and how she drew on her faith to carve out a new life for herself in her own old age, I find the wherewithal to hope that my own somewhat wavering faith might also find a new morning on the other side of mourning.

Sharing in the Communion of Saints

Finally, I turn to my own mother. A woman with a deep sense of connection to the saints and the Holy Family, she often wrote her thoughts out and then tucked them away in books or boxes. After her death I was standing in my garage, surrounded by stacks of her things, tears pouring down my cheeks, and feeling great pounding surges of grief and pain. I was mourning her loss, but in addition to dealing with her death, I had learned just three days after the funeral that her trusted financial adviser had stolen her money in a Ponzi scheme. I was now embroiled in massive legal cases, as well as seemingly crushing financial pressure. Betrayal, finances, and heartache dragged at my soul like spiritual quicksand.

"Oh, Mother!" I sobbed. "It's just too much!" I opened one box at random and pulled out a paper in her gorgeous, flowing handwriting. To my shock, I read: "St. Jude Thaddeus, known to help us. Pray that my daughter never lose heart when the way has so many pitfalls and may God guide her steps as she is shown the way. . . . Let her know this will not be the true and final case." I began to cry again, but this time there were tears of hope mixed with the grief. From the other side, my own mother's great faith in the saints and their assistance reached out and touched me. I brought the paper into the house and put it on the stand next to my chair along with my Bible. I had never been one to pray to Saint Jude in particular, but now I often offer a heartfelt plea to him to bring to God not just my words but my mother's prayer for me as well. Answers and directions are still murky much of the time, but I clutch my mother's faith as a lifeline for my own. In the one Body of Christ, we share in a great Communion of Saints, and so her witness endures even from the other side of the grave.

Faith in the Flesh

None of these women have (or had) huge public ministries, wrote erudite theology, or were members of religious orders. They are (and were) ordinary members of the laity, just plain folk like you and me. However, their experiences of living the promises of the faith and incorporating the promises of Scripture into everyday life have had a much greater impact on how I cope with the challenges of my own life than all the ministers and theology tomes in the world. There's something about seeing another person bring Christ to the world that makes the faith a living, breathing guide for existence. When you ask, "How did you do that? How did you make it through?" and a real person replies, the answer is all that more meaningful. It's one thing to read about faith; it's quite another to have it in the flesh beside you.

As I slowly learn to take these women's witnesses into my being, I know that there will come a time when I may be asked to become a witness myself. Reflecting on what they have in common, I am struck by three characteristics.



First, their faith is a first resort. Often we talk and sing about faith, but when the rough patches come (and come they will), we turn to other methods of coping, letting prayer fall down to the bottom of, and sometimes even off, the list. I know that some of these women did use strategies like counseling to assist, but I also know that they got up every morning and put on the armor of God before they faced the day. It is the first thing they tell me to do when I turn to them for guidance, freely admitting that without prayer they would not have made it through their own dark valleys. “Suit up and show up” is how Lauraine puts it. If I ever have any hope of becoming a witness myself, I need to learn to do just that.

Second, these women share their faith. It’s not like any of them are out carrying Bibles or waving crucifixes as they select bananas at the grocery store, but when you talk with them, you see that they quietly but firmly express their faith in God and his ability to assist when we ask. An essential component of their witness is their willingness to speak out when it’s the right time and place. It doesn’t have to be preachy or overbearing, but letting others know that it was your faith that gave you strength can be one of the most effective messages you will ever convey to the world.

Finally, these women are not afraid to admit that faith doesn’t make everything happy and cheery. All of them have gone through times of almost overwhelming pain and struggle. None have had an easy journey through life, yet all will say that often it is through the painful times that God draws us closer to him. I’ll confess that I feel like Saint Teresa of Ávila who pointed out, “If this is how you treat your friends, God, no wonder you have so few of them!” My own friends sympathize with that statement, admitting that many times they cried out to God in their pain, seeking explanations that never came, until they finally had to surrender, saying, “Thy will, not mine, be done.” Their faith didn’t make life better, but it made life bearable. That is, perhaps, the greatest witness we can give to the Gospel: Faith brings the roses in bloom in the middle of the thorn bush.

Sometimes we think the best way to share the Gospel is through a large and grand public ministry, through bestselling books or a religious vocation, but when it comes to making a concrete difference in the lives of everyday ordinary people, we don’t need to seek out some grand sweeping gesture that will show the world that God is with us. Just going through our lives with faith is more than enough, for in the end, the “witness of one” is often the only witness that matters.

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