

The silent army within the hospital walls

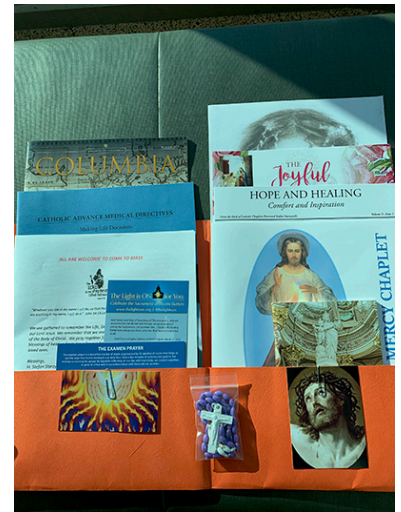
While doctors care for the physical needs of patients, Father Stefan Starzynski cares for their spiritual needs – comforting, praying, anointing and recruiting them. Yes, recruiting. The full-time chaplain at Inova Fairfax, a nearly 1,000-bed hospital in the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia, invites patients to join his apostolate, the Silent Army, to offer up their suffering for the Church.

Father Starzynski has been a chaplain there since 2015 and is the author of [“Miracles: Healing for a Broken World”](#) (OSV, \$15.95). Each day, he prays at the bedside of two or three dying patients, offering them anointing of the sick and the apostolic pardon as part of the Last Rite as well as praying with them. As part of his ministry, Father Starzynski founded the Silent Army, a local initiative in recognition of the power these patients hold for the Church.

“They have the most powerful of weapons at their disposal – suffering,” Father Starzynski told Our Sunday Visitor. He explains to patients that their suffering is redemptive when offered up in love in union with the passion of Jesus. “One of the most beautiful parts of this ministry is escorting a soul into heaven by prayer,” he said. “Once people see their suffering as a means to their own salvation, they can then move on and pray for the salvation of the Church and the world.”

How do patients respond? “With gratitude knowing that their suffering can help loved ones,” Father Starzynski said. “They also respond with joy and peace, knowing that they are important members of the Body of Christ with something precious to offer.”

A budding ministry



Inspirational materials. Courtesy photo

Father Starzynski created a holy card to hand out with a picture of Jesus wearing a crown of thorns. On the back, he composed a prayer:

“In union with Jesus’ suffering on the cross, I offer my suffering, my life, my joys, and my pains for vocations to the priesthood and religious life in the Catholic Diocese of Arlington.

“I am confident that this offering of my suffering and my discomfort has great value in the sight of God and will obtain from Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit and in union with Mary at the foot of the cross, a showering of graces and divine favor for all of my intentions.

“I ask this through Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen”

The idea for the Silent Army came soon after the holy card, while Father Starzynski watched “The Lord of the Rings” movies. “General Aragorn was going to lose, but then he [thought] to call upon the army of the dead [the forgotten people relegated to Middle Earth] and they came back and won,”

he said. "It inspired me to ask holy people to give up their suffering for the Church."



Padre Pio's confessional.
Courtesy photo

To further encourage them, Father Starzynski recruited volunteers to assemble folders filled with inspirational materials, including the prayer card and information on how to pray the Rosary and Divine Mercy Chaplet. They became known as the Padre Pio ministry, named for St. Pio of Pietrelcina, who had a strong devotion to the sick and suffering.

Father Starzynski felt that Padre Pio was blessing their work after he had a dream in May of 2018 where the face of the saint appeared on one of the folders. That inspired him to take a folder to the National Center for Padre Pio in Barto, Pennsylvania, where he visited with the manager, Vera Marie Calandra.

Calandra had been miraculously healed of a congenital illness as a baby in 1966 when her mother brought her to San Giovanni Rotondo, Italy, for Padre Pio's prayers. Her parents founded the center in 1971. Calandra took the folder from Father Starzynski and placed it inside their prized museum piece – Padre Pio's confessional. She wrote on it "Do Not Remove" and

put it on the seat where Padre Pio once spent long hours hearing confessions. It still lies there undisturbed.

Beyond their hospital

Bridget Haislmaier, a young woman with Down Syndrome and the oldest of 12 children, helps to assemble the folders. Her father recovered from Stage 4 cancer after receiving one. "I pray for all the sick and for God's poor people while I make the packets," she said. "I love making them because it's for his greater glory."

The idea for the Silent Army is spreading, according to Father Starzynski. "One priest came by and asked for 50 folders," he said. The hope is that it will eventually go international, and there are plans to specialize folders for specific conditions and to have one for doctors and nurses.

"Hospitals are storehouses of grace," Father Starzynski explained. "St. Therese [of Lisieux] said. 'If picking up a pen for love of God is powerful, how much more powerful is all the suffering of a person at the end of their life, offered up?' We need them as much as they need us."

During the coronavirus pandemic, Father Starzynski said that although he is still allowed to continue visiting patients, that is not the norm. Since many hospitals are not allowing priests in, he recommends that patients with a planned surgery receive the anointing of the sick before they go into the hospital.

"But even if they cannot receive the sacraments, God sees their hearts," Father Starzynski said. "Before the sacraments is the cross. It is the cross that gives us grace. Jesus wants us to have trust in him. He never abandons us."

Patti Maguire Armstrong writes from North Dakota.