

**Congratulations to Lyn Carman, winner of
the Second Place Award in the Ninth Annual
Simon Scanlon Writing Award Contest.**

How Good God Is

By Lyn Carman

Visiting patients in a hospital can be frustrating. It's difficult to be fully present to someone who chases you away. The woman sitting on the side of the hospital bed was clearly upset. "No, I'm not in the mood," she said. "This place triggers the bad in me. Either they give you too much food or weird food like green tacos. Can't get a decent gown to wear. Gotta click through thirty-five channels to turn off the stupid TV." Her hair was askew, no make-up, the cards on the bulletin board and wilted flowers broadcast the message that she had been there too long.

She waved me away in the general direction of the door. "No," she said again. "Get out." At the door I looked back. She sat looking at the rainy, gray day outside her window. Why, I wondered, would a sick person refuse such a gift? Outside her door, I leaned against the cool wall and breathed a prayer for her.

A few doors down the hall, the next person on my computer printout of Catholic patients appeared to be asleep, spread-eagled and silent, his generous belly moving gently up and down. Hesitant about waking him, I tapped lightly on the door frame. His body remained motionless but his eyes blinked open. "Hello," I said. "My name is Elena. I'm from Spiritual Care. I came to see how you are doing and I brought Holy Communion for you."

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“Oh, yeah.” He smiled and folded his hands across his chest. “Someone comes in every day but I don’t need it. Me and God are on good terms. We talk when I’m out riding my horse on the ranch. But I don’t take communion. Thanks.” There was a faint edge of belligerence in his voice.

A corner of my mind whispered “Why?” And another corner started shaping a withering soul-stirring reply. But all that seemed intrusive and certainly didn’t fit my commitment to live as a Secular Franciscan. When his eyes closed, I once again retreated to the hall. Some days I might have persisted. Maybe a priest could save his obstinate soul, or at least give him a chance to work out his feelings about the Church or whatever brought him to this point.

This was not shaping up as a good day. At morning Mass the priest had

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talked about the goodness of God—but where was that goodness? I remembered Perfect Joy as described by St. Francis; the monks shut out of their monastery on a cold rainy night, and shut out again upon further knocks at the door. I felt like I was being shut out. Is the goodness of God like Perfect Joy? I wondered.

Gloomy outside, disappointing inside. Out of nine patients visited, only two seemed to welcome either my efforts or the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. It was dismal. Did my personal worries show through? My husband, just diagnosed with lung cancer, and neither of us knowing how to deal with it or his weakened condition. My angry daughter, telling me it was my fault and that I was killing her father. These worries were gnawing at me even though I thought

I had parked them at the hospital entrance and handed them over to God. The deal was that, for a little while, God would do my worrying and I would be present to his sick people. I tried to give my life, my time, my caring, to them and they seemed to be responding, “No thanks.”

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Next on the list was Tessa. The brave smile she gave and her efforts to be cheery masked the reality of diabetes eating away her thirty-five-year-old body. I had seen her many times. Amputation followed amputation: toes, foot, shin, and now below the knee. I carefully avoided staring at the stitch-crossed stump.

We talked and held hands, and tears rolled down her cheeks as she described the latest threat: renal failure. Her immune system was not functioning as it should and her kidneys were failing. Diabetes doesn't make you sick; it eats you alive, bit by bit. “I think I'm going to die,” she whispered, “soon.”

“I don't know how to tell my children. They know I'm sick. Dana cries, ‘Mama play with me,’ but I tell them, ‘Mama can't walk any more,’ and ‘Mama's too tired.’ I should tell them ‘Mama's too strung out on pain killers to be Mama any more.’”

“Don't you think you should tell them?” I asked. “Could you start by telling them how much you love them, and just keep telling them?”

“Yeah, I do that. But what I like to do is write. I write letters to them. I write about what it's like to be in the hospital and wake up with my foot gone. I write about how happy I was when they were born. I write about what I do to survive this...and I write about God and about how hard it is to love God sometimes.”

My heart ached for her. And again I wondered...the goodness of

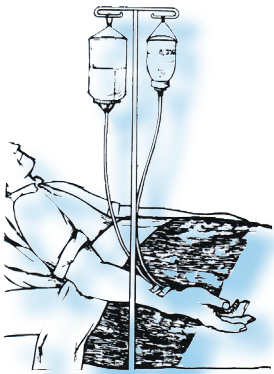
God? I don't see it."

"We told you, we don't want you."

She brightened for a moment then hung her head when I

asked if she wanted to receive Holy Communion. "No. I can't. When the diabetes began my husband divorced me. He said that seeing me suffer was too much for him. I married again, outside the church."

There was no anger in her voice, only sadness. "I know God loves me, and this is not what he wants. I love my church but, by marrying, I chose to be outside the Church, away from the Eucharist."



We held hands and prayed, thanking God for her, the children, for the husband who had left and the one who had stayed, for the medical staff, for the Church, and for Christ's ever faithful, healing presence. She wasn't angry, but I was overwhelmed with sadness. Ironically, this was someone who fully understood and cherished the Eucharist.

Next was oncology. Only one name on the list for this wing today, a name that seemed familiar. Too late, I realized it was a patient I had seen last week in another room. "Don't come in here," the wife stated sharply. "We told you, we don't want you."

My last stop was Mrs. Ortega in the surgical recovery wing. I peeked through the slit in the curtain and found a small, dark woman with hair the color of aged pewter. I wondered if her rough, sun-wrinkled skin was the product of long days working the fields. One arm was bandaged from wrist to shoulder.

"Not today," I thought. I'm tired and can't shake the feeling that God has abandoned me. Slowly I faded toward the door hoping she hadn't seen me. She hadn't, but her nurse did. "Could you help me?"

was her surprising request.

Rule number one of hospital visiting is that when one of the medical staff enters the room, the Eucharistic minister exits, or offers to leave. “I can leave and come back later,” I offered.

“No. Please stay. I need to change the dressing on Mrs. Ortega’s arm. Talk to her. Her name is Lupe.” Trapped. I couldn’t back out now.

“Como esta, Senora.”

“Bien, gracias,” she whispered.” She stared at me in silence, waiting for the real purpose of my visit. The nurse with dark hair and soft smile saved me from stumbling through any more of my meager Spanish vocabulary.

She began to peel back bandages and I wasn’t prepared for the wound that was slowly revealed. The flesh of Lupe’s slender arm was a cavity of red and black, eaten away by disease to expose raw flesh and white bone. I think I’m tough, ready to deal with tubes and trauma. There was the time I held the hand of a man dying from a self-inflicted bullet in the brain, and another where I held a dying woman in my arms until she breathed her last; but this sight brought a rush of perspiration and a queasy stomach.

*We began to pray together:
“Padre nuestro, que estas en
ciello...”*

A cry of pain escaped Lupe’s thin lips, and I clutched her hand, for my sake as well as hers. We began to pray together: “Padre nuestro, que estas en ciello...” The nurse, bent over her task, caught my eye and silently nodded a thank you. Tears traced a path down Lupe’s wrinkled cheek, and as we recited “Dios te salve, Maria...” Her eyes held mine. At that moment, in her suffering and in my feeble efforts, in my desire to care, to touch and be touched, to be with her, I was looking into the eyes of Jesus and he was looking into my soul and it was a moment of sweetness. This moment, the two of us caught up together in the love of Christ, this was the goodness of God.

I continued to hold Lupe's hand. The nurse continued to dress the wound, but I had no desire to flee the wound or the pain. Lupe received Communion, but the physical sign was almost redundant for me: Jesus was already present. I had held his pierced hand. Outside the window it had become a glorious day.

I would go home, hold tight to my husband, pray for my daughter, and know how good God is.



Lyn Carman is a Eucharistic Minister to the Sick at Cottage Hospital in Santa Barbara and Minister for the Santa Barbara Secular Franciscan St. Louis the King Fraternity. Her first writing award was at the age of fifteen when she won a writing contest, **The Divisions of Government Under the Federal Constitution**. Since then she and her husband, Bob, have written four mathematics books together. Besides writing, they share a love for running and for being with their nine grandchildren and their families. Lyn may be reached through **The Way**.

