

Portering

This Sunday past my wife and I joined several of our St. Anne Parish friends to assist with the portering of some of the residents of Holy Family Home to their weekly liturgy service. Holy Family Home has wards providing care to a large number of seniors requiring various levels of it, and the Ukrainian Catholic parishes of Winnipeg are invited, taking turns on Sundays, to provide volunteers to assist these wheelchair and walker-bound residents by “portering”, i.e., assisting them to get to and from the liturgy service every Sunday.

This is always a pleasant duty for me as the residents are gracious in their appreciation of this service, usually demonstrating a placid, stoic acceptance of their age and frailties. Many are visited frequently by family and friends, but many are not, and this little bit of social contact with the volunteers seems to be much anticipated.

And so, as I was returning one of the seniors, a lady I would judge to be in her high eighties or so, to her ward, I attempted to strike up a conversation with her, but soon realized that both her hearing and her sight were quite limited and my attempt to speak with her was drawing no response. Or so I thought, until, just as we had arrived with her wheelchair near the care desk on her ward, she spoke out to thank me for my service, asking me to come around to the front of her chair where she could see me. I complied, of course, and as I was doing so, she reached for my hand which I had placed lightly on her shoulder in a gesture, I suppose, of departure. As I bent toward her she also leaned forward, as if trying to will her eyes to see me, clasping my hand rather more firmly than I had expected and said, “At least I have touched another human hand today!”

I do not know what this would do to your heart, but it went directly to the softest spot in mine. In that one touch and that one brief moment was conveyed to me the overwhelming loneliness that may beset anyone isolated from a previous life by age, infirmities and circumstance. I do not know this lady’s name, her family situation nor, in fact, anything else about her, but that does not matter for my purposes herein, as I wish only to say that she had a profound effect on me in that briefest of exchanges between us. I am the richer for it, as I know that it was I who was portered to deeper and more intimate appreciation of the human condition.