

A profound moment of my priesthood

One of the very first prayers we learned to pray, if not even the very first one as Catholics, is the prayer of making the Sign of the Cross. This simple act, whether made with the words “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” or silently and reverently, is indeed a prayer. And it can be a powerful one.

One of more profound memories from my priesthood involved a visit a few years ago with an elderly man in the hospital who was dying. When I arrived, he was all alone in his room — no family, nurses or anyone. And he wasn’t even conscious. But I knew he could hear me. His breathing was slow. He was still, unmoving.

I began to pray the rite of the Anointing of the Sick over him I prayed the prayers slowly, gently; loud enough that he could hear but soft enough to be sincere and prayerful.

I remembered the words of Cardinal William H. Keeler who taught me many years ago as a seminarian-deacon and soon-to-be priest that the sacrament of the sick is not for the dead. It is for the living.

I anointed the man in the bed, as the rite suggests, with oil in the form of the sign of the cross on his forehead and then also on his hands. After praying the Lord’s prayer aloud, and giving him the “apostolic pardon,” a prayer for the remission of all his sins before the moment of death, I then gave him a final blessing in the Sign of the Cross over his body.

As soon as I finished, he died. Right in front of me.

This was also around 3 p.m., known as the hour of Divine Mercy. I later learned his wife had been praying this prayer at home for him while I was anointing him.

That was an emotionally intense experience, but as I look back, it was one of the best in my priesthood.

At the moment that man received the last blessing from the Church, through its priest sent to serve him in his final hour and last breath, he went to see and meet our God, the Holy Trinity, who we think of and pray to every time we make the Sign of the Cross.

As we make this prayer, may we live in such desire as to long to see the One, or more appropriately, the “three as One,” today and every day of our lives, in preparation for our own last day.