

Facing death enriches trust in God

In last week's column I shared my 'near-death' experience from pulmonary embolisms – blood clots that broke off from a larger clot in my leg and traveled to my lungs. As I explained last week, a blood clot in the leg is known as DVT – Deep Vein Thrombosis. Two hundred thousand people die each year in the U.S. from blood clots – more than die of AIDS and breast cancer combined.

I described the physical aspects last week. Today I wanted to share some of the emotional and spiritual parts.

Emotionally, I discovered how hard-headed I really am! I was out for my usual late-night walk, and experienced terrible difficulty in breathing. Instead of stopping immediately, I pushed on. I walked for almost another hour 'pretending' that I could 'shake it off.' That's known as denial! It's something we men are especially good at. From childhood we have been told to 'shake it off,' 'play through the pain,' 'keep on going.' Following those inner voices nearly proved to be fatal. Learn from my denial. If you feel bad, get help.

Once I got to the emergency room, thanks to the kindness of Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski, my second emotional experience was of calm. I wasn't panicked at all by being wheeled on a stretcher, having tubes inserted and various tests performed. I felt comforted that someone was taking care of me. Spiritually, that's known as letting go and letting God!

As I faced the gravity of blood clots wandering through my body with potentially lethal implications, I had to confront my mortality once again. When Bishop Rozanski asked me if he could do anything, I replied: "How about absolution?"

I laugh now, but it seems to me that what we do wrong has greater clarity than what we do right. In my talks I refer to it as the 'gravity of negativity.' In other words, we can do 100 things right in a day, but if we do one thing wrong, that will likely be on our minds. It comes, perhaps, from childhood scrupulosity or just a sensitive nature.

At the end of life, we would all have wanted to have lived a perfect life. The problem is that that is impossible! We can't always say the right thing, do the right thing or

even always know the right thing to do or say. I'm comforted, that, in their writings, the greatest saints often thought of themselves as great sinners! At least I could identify with the sin if I couldn't identify with the sanctity.

A second, much more positive spiritual reaction, was a sense of profound gratitude. I was grateful, first, for all the wonderful people I had been privileged to meet in my life as a priest. The best of gift of life has been the people.

Secondly, I was conscious of being grateful that I had been able to play at least a small part in the healing of the world. I hope my radio show has made a difference. I hope this column has made a difference. I hope all the talks and retreats and workshops and liturgies have helped. I hope the countless hours of counseling and hearing confessions have helped.

At the end of life, the words of St. Francis of Assisi are so pertinent: "I have done what was mine to do. May God show you what is yours."

There's a strange calm that comes with facing death. There is trust - an obvious trust in the medical staff so very present. But a more profound trust in God. The trust is that God will bless what was good in my life, and even find a way to bring good out of what was bad in my life!

There's a calm that comes with knowing that there is nothing else to say or to do. I'm reminded of a reporter rushing up to Mahatma Gandhi as his train pulled away from the station and calling out, "Do you have a message?" Gandhi replied, "My life is my message."