

# Letters that made a difference

Father Milton Hipsley's letters started arriving on my desk in the summer of 2009. Very neatly written in all capital letters, the notes always seemed focused on the importance of kindness and of taking time for spiritual reflection. A new message appeared every two weeks or so.

What struck me most about the correspondence was that I knew the letter writer was suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

Father Hipsley, a longtime Western Maryland prison chaplain and pastor of St. Mary in Cumberland, had recently moved into Mercy Ridge Retirement Community in Timonium. Wearing a special electronic bracelet so medical staff could monitor his location, the priest who had often visited prisoners was suddenly faced with his own kind of confinement.

To me, the priest's letters were a very tangible demonstration of Father Hipsley's determination to continue his ministry in one of the only ways left to him – through the mail.

About a year after I received that first letter and a year after Father Hipsley was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, I called Ann Pugh and asked her how she would feel about me writing a story about her brother.

Naturally somewhat hesitant about how I would portray her sibling, Ann agreed to my proposal after I assured her that the story would highlight Father Hipsley's ministry of pen and paper. She graciously accompanied me on a visit to Mercy Ridge so I could spend some time with the retired pastor.

The story that resulted from that meeting is one I will always cherish. I was moved by the simple, sincere faith of a man who knew at some level that his mind was leaving him – but who didn't let that stop him. He remained focused on faith and helping others.

Father Hipsley no longer sends me letters. I recently called Ann and her husband, Frank, and they confirmed what I had suspected: the priest's condition has

deteriorated in the last year. He no longer speaks of his beloved Cumberland. Sadly, he's even given up writing letters.

"It's taken a toll," Frank told me. "He asked how his brother, Bob, was doing. He gave him last rites last August."

Ann reported that the head nurse at Mercy Ridge believes Father Hipsley has found a sense of peace. He no longer agonizes about not being able to serve his parishioners at St. Mary or the prisoners in Western Maryland.

"He often talked about the letters he got and the letters he wrote," Frank said. "That was an important part of his life – a tiny piece of his ministry that he still had. It filled an important void in his life. I think it's a tribute to him that people still write to him."

The "long goodbye" has been difficult for Ann and Frank, but the parishioners of St. Joseph in Cockeysville believe God must have a purpose in it.

"I guess it's part of God's plan," Frank said. "It gives people like us the privilege of being a caretaker. So, maybe that's part of the plan that we will never understand."

God bless you, Father Hipsley. Thank you for your priesthood and thank you for your courage in allowing me to share your story. Your letters are in a special folder that I keep on my desk. I plan to save them and return to them often.

***The story on Father Hipsley's letter ministry*** was recently awarded first place in the feature category of a journalism competition sponsored by the Maryland, Delaware, DC Press Association.

*Also see:*

Living like Father Hipsley