

Column

Clergy often find themselves in and out of hospitals, nursing homes and other care facilities. It does not take long to develop a profound respect and appreciation for those who work in such places. They work long hours, perform tasks that many would find unpleasant if not impossible and are often called to deal with people who are emotionally stressed and even angry. Yet, most do so with amazing skill, grace and cheerfulness.

Only recently did I become aware that actual acts of violence against healthcare workers not only occur but are on the increase. What prompted this awareness was a notice posted in the emergency room of a nearby facility. It read:

“Our workers have the right to be treated with dignity and respect at all times. They should be able to do their jobs without being physically or verbally abused. Thank you for respecting their right to an abuse-free workplace.”

After seeing it, I did some research and came across a recent study that found that 44 percent of nurses reported experiencing physical violence, while 68 percent reported experiencing verbal abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not hard to see how ever-changing, government-mandated protocols would create an environment ripe for confrontation. I want to suggest such confrontations in fact go back beyond the recent Covid crisis and represent a state of affairs already in full swing before its advent. That state of affairs of which I am thinking is the general breakdown of order and loss of civility in society at large.

As a small child I remember accompanying my parents to visit sick friends in hospital. I don't know about others – I suspect it was true for them as well – the sight of a nurse in a starched white dress, cap and shoes coming down a corridor was enough to send me darting behind my mother's skirt. These women commanded respect. I wouldn't be surprised if even the doctors were afraid of them. You would no more think of sassing one of these indomitable women than you would think of taking back to your parents, the school principal, a policeman or a clergyman.

Those days are past, and what a sad commentary it is on our society that proper respect has gone the way of the dodo bird. It began to go out of fashion in the turbulent '60s and now the process seems to be complete in the second decade of the 21st-century.

What has resulted has been an increase in fear, more laws, more surveillance cameras, additional security guards and the posting of such notices as the one I have just mentioned. One hospital in Chattanooga has gone so far as to require all visitors to stop at a counter in the lobby, give the name of the patient they are visiting, present a drivers license which is photocopied and to wear a paste-on badge.

The loss of respect and order is a societal problem, but what does the Bible say on the subject? Well, it enjoins both. One verse in particular comes to mind, 2 Timothy 2:12. It says: "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty."

From this verse we can extrapolate that God prefers order to chaos and has ordained it. It is essential for the flourishing of individuals and communities.

Respect for order, however, does not mean blind allegiance to the powers that be. Followers of Jesus may at times have to say no to unlawful commands, as we learn in other passages of scripture. For example, when the authorities of Peter's day commanded him not to preach in the name of Jesus, his response was: "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

In like circumstances, Peter's response must be our response, but hopefully such times will be rare. In ordinary circumstances, the demeanor of the Christian is to be one of respect, deference for those in authority, service and civility. We are to shine as lights in the world.

When a society become Christian, or rather when there is common understanding of right and wrong, when God's good and gracious rule is acknowledged, when there is self-discipline and self-control, the need for notices advising visitors not to assault the staff goes away . . . happiness is increased and humans flourish.

Virtues I have been describing may be unfashionable, but can we really live without them?

KEEP, we beseech thee, O Lord, thy Church with thy perpetual mercy; and, because the frailty of man without thee cannot but fall, keep us ever by thy help from all things hurtful, and lead us to all things profitable to our salvation;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect, 15th Sunday after Trinity, from the Book of Common Prayer).

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