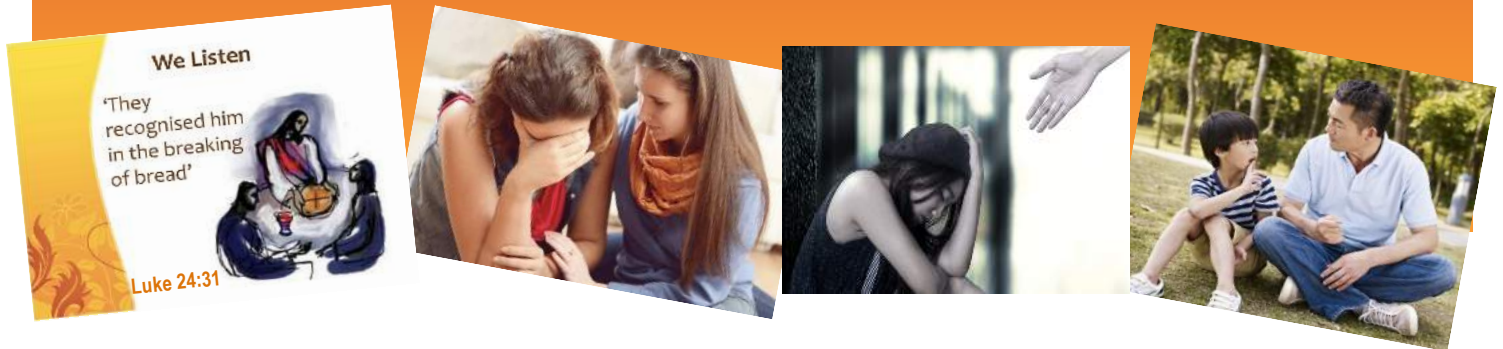


Ministry of Presence

Jesus came and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you" (John 20:19)



Presence is important

Jesus, on the night He was to face His greatest test went out to pray. Mark says He was "overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (Mark 14:34). Jesus asked Peter, James and John to go with Him. His one request of them was to stay and keep watch. **Their presence was needed by our Lord.** We may not understand why. Perhaps this illustrates one of the powerful and meaningful ways we minister to overwhelmed people. To know someone else cares and is there with you is the critical need of the moment.

The following excerpt was written by Joseph Bayly in his book, "**A View from the Hearse,**" after he laid three of his sons to rest. It may give us some insight on how to be a source of comfort to others, how to be in the "*Ministry of Presence*".

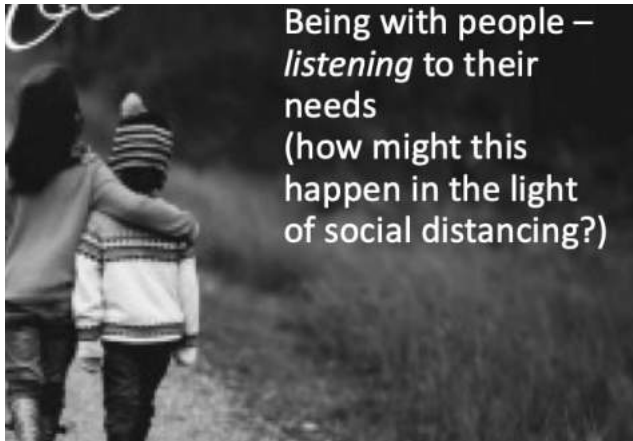
"I was sitting, torn by grief. Someone came and talked to me of God's dealings, of why it happened, of hope beyond the grave. He talked constantly; he said things I knew were true. I was unmoved except to wish he'd go away. He finally did."

"Another came and sat beside me. He just sat beside me for an hour and more, listened when I said something, answered briefly, prayed simply, left. I was moved. I was comforted. I hated to see him go."



Presence is of essence

The presence of a Christian has meaning beyond having just another physical body in the room. The ministry of presence is a ministry given to all believers. We are all *priests* in service to God. We are a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9), and we mediate God's presence.



Who is ever prepared for any crisis call, prepared with the “right words”? Who thinks conversation will come easily when we do not expect that our own family members caught the virus. Imagine reading all these on what’s app and being thousands of miles apart. And with today’s global pandemic, one cannot just board a plane and fly over to comfort the other and be present to the loved ones.

Ministry of Presence usually relates to a personal touch and physical presence. Yet this what’s app story shows us that one can be fully present to the other’s suffering through a deep heart to heart connection, bringing God’s merciful presence in silence. And then, the floodgates will open and God who sees the honest tears of His people will come to heal and comfort. Only when one is truly present to God and the other, can one bring God’s Healing Presence to the other. When such occasions arise, words are not as important as the presence of another person. Knowing they are not alone, knowing someone cares is transforming. Sometimes the transformation is as simple as to hope they will make it through the difficult time.

A True Story

The what’s app message came late at night due to the time difference between Singapore and Europe. The aunt who received the text message on the family’s group chat, immediately made a video call to speak to her niece, while the other extended family members were texting words of comfort and biblical verses etc. The niece’s voice on the other end sounded strained, shaky and weak. “*My husband caught the Covid-19 virus and is in ICU*”. Before the aunt could say anything, she burst into tears as her niece was all alone in a foreign land. The aunt did not ask any interrogative questions, like how did he catch Covid-19 or why didn’t they take more precautions, but she just cried and her niece started crying too. Both were crying for about a minute. No exchange of words, just looking at each other on the video call, torn miles apart but connected heart to heart. There in the midst of this silent sacred connection, in the *Ministry of Presence*, God revealed Himself, through shared tears, the sympathetic gaze, wordless words that spoke volumes about love, care, sharing pain, being present, listening without judging, embracing the other (via video call), and praying from the depths in silence. That’s when catharsis happens. Catharsis is the process of releasing, and thereby providing relief from strong or repressed emotions.

Don’t we all go through some form of catharsis when we feel heard and empathised with. Some experienced this in their own conversion stories, others in their prayer time with God, or in their faith sharing with another. All this can only happen within the *Ministry of Presence*. When people feel listened to, loved and forgiven, feel a sense of relief, that they have been understood, that someone truly listens and cares - God and the other.

A call to ministry is a call to participate in the lives of others, beyond the boundaries of family and church, to share their pains and sorrows not only their joys. Not to be a fair-weather friend, but an all-weather friend. It is more a commitment to give the other a personal presence than simply to give them words. When we have less concern about the right words and more concern for being present in people's lives, ministry becomes more meaningful. Despite the pandemic and social distancing, we can practice this *Ministry of Presence*. Being innovative, creative, proactive in noticing who amongst us, in our families, in our ministries and in our work place seem worried and downcast. Technology can be a boon (a thing that is helpful and beneficial) or a bane (a cause of great distress and annoyance). We need to use social media judiciously, sussing out, discerning how best to use this for God's Greater Glory and Honour. We scour the internet for upskilling, up learning, celebrities gossip news, etc. Have we ever used the social media to truly connect and ask the other person, how things are at home, is there anything they need, etc?

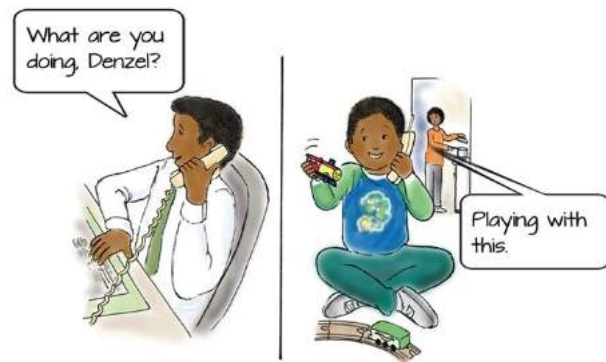


When we think of presence, can we think of anyone? Someone once shared that her grandfather *always* made her feel like the most important person in the world because he gave her his undivided attention, genuinely engaging in their conversations and free time together. He listened and was not concerned about what he would say next. Her grandfather knew the value of just being *present* with her.

God, the Father, is the one who models this kind of ministry for us. Omnipresence, Omnipotent God. Amazing grace! Like in the story of the woman at the well and how Jesus' presence transformed her life (John 4). Yes, Jesus does communicate and always has the right words. Yet, a major concern, a first concern of His is fellowship, making His presence known, participating in our lives.

Our call may not come at 4 am., but it will come. The challenge for us is, how shall we live in view of the kind of God we worship? God has been present and available, so will His people be present and available to one another. As His care for us has been manifested in tangible ways, our caring should also be revealed by our presence. Being present with those who hurt and are overwhelmed, however uncomfortable we may be, is often the act of deliverance they need most.

Ministry of Presence is allowing someone to tell us whatever is on their mind in that moment - the joys, worries, triumphs, trials and tribulations. We focused on every little detail, not because we can think of an appropriate response, but rather, to hear what they are truly expressing to us, be it gratitude, heartache, fear or joy. The practice of being present doesn't always come naturally. In fact, when we first give it a try it's downright difficult - even awkward.



How can we be present to one another despite social distancing?

How to be present to another

1. **Active listening:** Listen with intention. Be open to what the person wants to share, including hopes, fears, concerns, etc. Create a safe and sacred environment where the person feels comfortable talking about whatever is on his or her mind. Encourage conversation by making appropriate eye contact and *showing* them that you care about what they have to say. Ask open-ended questions judiciously, not interrogatively.
2. **Be comfortable with silence:** Sometimes being silent is the most powerful and engaging act. It helps people process their thoughts, engage their memories and then move forward. Being silent and present in the moment sometimes allows the person to proceed forward or stimulates an entirely new direction for the conversation. Your physical presence alone speaks volumes. Just sitting with them might be what he or she needs in that moment.
3. **Reduce distractions:** Focus on one thing at a time when you're with the person. Put your devices away, turn off the T.V. and other things that may try to take your attention away from the person. Be in the moment and try not to think about all the other things you have to do while you're with the person. Pray for the grace of attentive, compassionate listening
4. **Practice gratitude:** Help them find joy in the small moments: a sunbeam through the window, the smell of brewing coffee, the sound of their favourite music playing, the feel of a handshake or a hug, etc.

With practice, this *Ministry of Presence* can become engrained in all of our interactions, with family, friends, colleagues and ministry members. We become more intentional with our time with others. We become truly eager to hear their sacred stories and we savour every detail, the joys, frustrations, memories, and so on. We don't know how many more times we will get to hear these stories. And this time we have together now, in the present, is a gift.



CATHOLIC SPIRITUALITY CENTRE
Encountering God • Healing Hearts • Empowering Lives

Fr. Andrew Wong, Spiritual Director & Veronica Nathan, Programme Manager/ Counsellor