

In today's gospel reading from the eleventh chapter of John's gospel, Jesus performs the greatest sign of His public ministry: He brings his dear friend, Lazurus, who has been dead for four days, back to life. (Lazurus is the form of the name Eleazar, which means, God is my help). Those Jews who witnessed the supernatural event must have been 'Blown away' by His miracle. Indeed, once Lazurus had been restored to life, we learned from John's account that "Many of the Jews who had come to Mary and seen what He had done had come to believe in Him. (Jn. 11:45)

It is not without significance that the sisters of Lazurus, Martha and Mary, each say to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died". (Jn.11:21,32) Once again we are reminded that death casts a deep shadow over the human family. But Jesus adds a new, unexpected twist. "This illness is not to end in death, but is for the glory of God, that the son of God may be glorified through it". (Jn 11:4)

In years past, it was commonplace for our loved ones to die in the comfort of their home. When a family member was at death's door, it was the custom to call upon the local parish priest to administer the 'Last Rites' of the Church, which included Extreme Unction, the sacrament of the dying. The priest would hasten to the home of the dying person and, upon arrival, be greeted at the front door by the spouse and the children of the terminally ill Catholic. One held a crucifix in their hand while two others carried lighted candles. In silence, they would lead the priest, acting in the Person of Christ, to the darkened bedroom of the gravely ill person at the hour of his death. It served as a reminder that Christ was indeed present and was sure to accompany the Catholic on his final journey from earth to heaven, from death to life. It is a lovely custom. Sadly, it has largely been abandoned in our day.

Sometimes, the priest failed to make it on time. The patient had expired while he was in transit. The family may have been disappointed, but their faith in life after death remained strong. Together, the family prayed with the priest. Oftentimes, they prayed the rosary.

In the face of death, Jesus declares Himself to be the Resurrection and the Life. He is able to give life, eternal life that death cannot extinguish. Whoever has eternal life will never die, and will not experience death, ever.

While it is true that Jesus returned Lazurus to earthly life, it is also true that the friend of Jesus will inevitably die and be wrapped in burial cloths yet again. Nevertheless, His being raised to life by Jesus foreshadows Jesus' own resurrection a short time later on Easter Sunday.

Jesus Christ is the Lord of death and life. Earlier in John's gospel, Jesus said, "I have come to bring you life, life in all its fullness" (Jn. 10:10). Death is no obstacle to Jesus. He would die on the cross, but death could not hold Him.

"Lord, If you had been here, my brother would not have died". But death does not have the final word. Such is the devout faith of families a priest usually encounters when he is prepared to administer the sacrament. They truly believe the words of the creed: "I believe in the Resurrection of the body and life everlasting".

A footnote: Father Walter Ciszek, a Polish Jesuit priest, spent twenty-three years in Russian prisons and work camps during the so-called 'cold war'. Eventually, he was released and returned home to America. In his book, "He Leadeth Me", he describes the deep faith in eternal life that burned so brightly in the hearts of the Russian people. All the decades of atheistic propaganda and state sponsored persecution failed to dampen the spirits of the faithful.