

One morning, several years ago, I was saddened to read the death notice of a former high school classmate of mine who died in his early fifties. What made his death so tragic was not so much his age at the time of death or even the many classmates he left behind, but that he died alone without the consolation of the presence of his family and friends. For most of his adult life, he struggled with alcohol and was found dead under the steps of Albany's South Mall. His was a hidden death.

The hour of a Christian's death can be a profound and beautiful communal experience. People find the qualities of presence and communion when they are with people close to the end of their mortal life. Every experience of death brings us closer to God. Our sympathy for the dying person can inspire in us wonderful acts of tenderness and devotion.

Consider the deathbed scene in the 1943 film "Yankee Doodle Dandy" about the legendary songwriter and performer George M. Cohan. The fabled entertainer is called home to be at the bedside of his dying father. After whispering words of deep and lasting affection for the one who inspired throughout his life, the old man closes his eyes in death and his son, George, then begins to weep. The moviegoers could undoubtedly identify with this powerful scene given that they shared a similar experience.

In the Gospel of John there is the mutual presence of Christ on the cross and his disciples, Mary, the mother of Jesus Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary of Magdala and the Beloved Disciple, John. In being present to each other the small group find themselves in communion.

Our life does not end at death. It does not have the final word. Deep within each of us is a longing for God, a longing for heaven. Our hope is to be in God's presence forever.

If there is one word that sums up the Christian faith, it is presence. In Christ, we enjoy Christ's presence among us. In the sacrament of His Body and Blood, we speak of the "real presence". And when we are present to each other, we experience the mystery of Divine Communion, the Trinity.

Some of you may be familiar with the work of the recording artist, Eric Clapton. In a song he recorded with the group "Blind Faith", Clapton wrote of the presence of the Lord, the song's title. Here are some of the words of the song.

"Everybody knows the secret, everyone knows the score. I have finally found a place in the Presence of the Lord".

May she rest in peace.