News
Spirituality



A man donates blood at a Red Cross blood drive. (Unsplash/LuAnn Hunt)

by Brian Harper

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One of the most effective forms of evangelization is a good example. I am convinced that those who carry out their spiritual lives with grace and joy do more to bring others to faith than a well-crafted argument. As Pope Francis tweeted in 2016, "The Church does not grow through proselytism, but by attraction." This is one of the reasons Catholics venerate saints. A sermon or article can introduce us to the works of mercy, but St. Mother Teresa or Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati beautifully embodying those acts of service give us a practical sense of how we might bring those qualities into our own lives.

Any of us who practice a particular religion have more personal figures who help make the sacred captivating. In my life, my grandfather, Bill Carroll, who passed away Dec.23 after suffering a stroke, was such an individual. Just as most saints demonstrate distinct aspects of a broader religious tradition — like St. Maximilian Kolbe's sacrifice or St. Teresa of Ávila's mysticism — my grandfather showed those of us who knew him how to focus one's life outward, to make one's days about what could be done for others in quiet, steady and simple ways.

It seemed as though there were few moments when he was not looking for an opportunity to do something on someone else's behalf. To be in his orbit was to know someone who had completely adopted your interests as his own. Augustine of Hippo, my grandfather's patron saint, wrote that "God loves each of us as if there were only one of us," and that was how Grandpa Bill approached the people in his life. In my case, this meant handwritten letters from him, with enclosed newspaper clippings about U.S. presidents. It meant e-mails from a public library computer, with references to a book he was reading about the Jesuits, for whom I used to work, or a crossword puzzle clue about Peru, where I used to live. Each member of our family has their own stories like these; his sphere of love and affection knew no limits, always growing to embrace new additions to our family.

This was especially evident in the way he practiced his faith. He prayed the rosary every day and developed his own method of working through each decade, with every bead representing a different child, grandchild or great-grandchild of his. When we asked for his prayers, he would assure us that he already had been praying for us and would continue to do so.

Perhaps the reason his unparalleled attention toward his family was so striking was that he treated himself with such humility. As lavish as he was toward others, his

own life was a lesson in modesty. The pleasures he allowed himself were understated: whacking golf balls in a park near his apartment, participating in a senior bowling league, spending a Saturday watching the Masters, Marquette basketball, or the Cincinnati Reds, and enjoying an unlimited phone plan that granted him long chats with his kids.

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My grandfather was the least wasteful person I know, sometimes to his children's irritation. When his daughters told him his windbreaker was an inappropriate way to brave a Wisconsin winter, he refused to wear the parka they tried to buy him. He found creative ways to stretch the life of a bottle of ketchup and split Kleenex in half to get two tissues for the price of one. He avoided cars whenever he could, preferring to get exercise by riding his bicycle to and from work and, once he was retired, to the library or local technical college to read the paper and check his e-mail. When a newspaper photographer took a photo of him biking while a blizzard swirled around him, Grandpa Bill — in a characteristic effort to avoid publicity — told the photographer he would sue him if he printed his name. It didn't matter; everyone in town knew exactly who it was when they saw the picture the next morning.

It wasn't that my grandfather was cheap; he simply preferred to give away what he had. This attitude extended well beyond his family, touching the lives of people he never even met. He spent his career with the Wisconsin Jobs Service, helping people find employment, and was a member of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. During his retirement, he delivered food to people in need with Meals on Wheels, and throughout his life, he donated 176 gallons of blood. Because a single pint of blood can save up to three lives, Grandpa Bill's contributions potentially saved more than 4,000 people.

Not long ago, my Uncle John gave his dad and my grandfather a journal with questions to which he could respond, such as "Who was your favorite teacher in grade school?" Grandpa Bill had an extraordinarily sharp mind and memory, but ever averse to calling attention to himself, his answers were succinct. When he returned the book, though, he told my uncle to be sure to read the last page.

Unprompted, Grandpa Bill had written an old Irish saying: "You never get over your father — nor are you required to."

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This was probably the closest my grandfather came to recognizing the tremendous role his steadfast love played in his family members' lives. Now that he is gone, his absence is certainly profound. But like anyone who leaves loved ones behind, he is still with us in the ways that matter most, having showed us how to live a good and faithful life long before he left. His example is in his brother, a retired priest, and in my aunts, uncles, and cousins, who reach out to and pray for those in need, welcomingly open their doors, volunteer their time and talents, and show their families the meaning of unconditional love.

The guiding ethos of my grandfather's life seemed to be John the Baptist's words about Jesus in the Gospel of John: "He must increase; I must decrease." The irony, though, is that in having so unassumingly lowered himself so as to lift others, my grandpa leaves those of us who remember him hoping to increase in ourselves his very best characteristics, to better emulate a good man and grow closer to the God he served so well.

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