

# A Summer of Growth

By Robert Camara



*Grounds at the Monastery Guesthouse of the SSJE*



*Entrance to the Massachusetts General Hospital*

As many of the clergy of this diocese will remember, a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) is required in the formation of clergy in this diocese. Along with two of my other colleagues at Dio, I spent much of my summer fulfilling this requirement. As the summer approached I looked forward, with some anxiety and excitement, to what the experience would be like. Some of you may remember those days, way back when, in elementary and high school when the guidance counselors would ask us to think about what we wanted to become when we grew up. Well, the thought of being a doctor was usually a common response, but blood and other more intimate situations were usually enough to make me think again. But, this summer, there was no getting away from it, and the hospital corridors became a second home to me as I took on the role of an Inter-faith hospital chaplain undertaking a unit of CPE.

At the end of May I temporarily moved to Boston, Massachusetts where I had the privilege of doing my CPE unit at the Massachusetts General Hospital. I am immensely grateful to the brothers at the Society of St. John the Evangelist ([www.ssje.org](http://www.ssje.org)) for their hospitality and friendship as they welcomed me to the monastery in Cambridge for the summer. I had the honour and privilege of living in the guesthouse of the monastery this summer while I was undertaking my unit of CPE. This was a tremendous spiritual support

for me as it allowed me to take the time to be quiet, to pray and to reflect on my experiences with patients and families at the hospital. It was a wonderful experience to be able to join the brothers daily for morning prayer at 6 a.m. before I went off to the hospital, to return home to the guesthouse and join them and the community for evening prayer or the Eucharist, to end my evenings with sung compline and to be able to assist at the Saturday and Sunday Eucharist in the chapel. Silence, meditation, prayer and spiritual direction were wonderful gifts that enhanced my experience of CPE and allowed me to grow – and for this I am grateful for the warmth and generosity of the SSJE.

The Massachusetts General Hospital is the third oldest general hospital in the United States (1811) and the oldest and largest hospital in New England. It is ranked among the top five hospitals in the US and is designated a Magnet hospital, the highest honor for nursing excellence awarded by the American Nurses Credentialing Center. It is a 900-bed medical center, located in the heart of Boston, and offers sophisticated diagnostic and therapeutic care in virtually every specialty and subspecialty of medicine and surgery and is known for its adult and pediatric trauma and burn care. They are also known for their innovations in cancer, digestive disorders, heart disease, transplantation and vascular medicine and have the largest hospital-based research program in the United States. Like the Royal Victoria Hospital and the Montreal General Hospital are teaching hospitals for McGill's Medical Faculty, the Mass General is the original and largest teaching hospital of Harvard Medical School. If you've made it through my description of the hospital you should be able to tell that I was impressed by the quality and standard of health care provided by the doctors, nurses and staff of the hospital. I was particularly impressed by the success of the hospital in their integration of spiritual care with their health-care practices.

The CPE program at the Mass General is directed and supervised by the Rev. Angelika Zollfrank, ACPE Supervisor, Interfaith Chaplain and Director of the Clinical Pastoral Education programs at the Massachusetts General Hospital. The Chaplaincy Department is comprised of some 19 full-time and part-time chaplains which include an Episcopalian deacon, a Lutheran pastor, several Roman Catholic priests, a rabbi, an Imam, denominational ministers of the Methodist, Unitarian Universalist, and United Church of Christ, Buddhists and a number of lay chaplains including some 30 volunteer Eucharistic ministers and three full time support staff. With this wealth of resources, I and five other theological students from various parts of the United States undertook the CPE unit. The CPE small group is an important group of peers who undertake the program with you and partake in providing feedback, constructive criticism and support of the work we do as CPE chaplains. I was blessed with a group of colleagues who were tremendously supportive in the process of my learning and growth during the CPE program.

I was assigned three units at the hospital where I was responsible for the spiritual care of the staff and patients of that unit – they included the Surgical Intensive Care Unit, a step-down surgical unit and a general medical unit. In addition to our three assigned floors, we were also responsible once every 10 days or so for the entire hospital while we were on-call. This was a residential on-call, meaning that I lived in the hospital over night from 8:30 a.m. to 6:00 a.m. the following day. It was during my on-call shifts that I had some very powerful and meaningful experiences of spiritual growth and development. Calls to the post-operating room, emergency room, waiting room or in the patient’s room left indelible experiences of the presence of the divine working in our lives and a real experience of faith that exhibited the strong spiritual depth of the patients and staff with whom I worked. While I still have vivid images of being in the emergency room bay with a deceased patient at 2:30 in the morning and being swept up by the holiness of that moment in the balance of life and death, I also had some very moving and powerful moments with patients as they shared their personal stories, their celebrations and their moments of weakness, their pain and grief and their hopes.

It is difficult to sum up in such a short space the richness of such a program and the many spiritual gifts that I received from my patients and the staff and colleagues I worked with this summer. However, the CPE program helped me to enhance my skills in the area of addressing existential and spiritual needs; to develop a better awareness of myself and my role; to integrate spiritual caregiving into my personal and professional identity; to deepen my presence with others; to get practice in theological/existential reflection on spiritual caregiving; to learn about the diversity of peoples’ spiritual and religious lives; and to learn to initiate, deepen, and end pastoral relationships. It was an intense summer that has provided me with many opportunities for growth in my spiritual, theological and professional formation as a priest and I am grateful for that experience and the support of those who walked the journey with me.



*Getting ready for a visit to the operating room*



*Outside the Emergency Entrance at the Massachusetts General Hospital*