



DOROTHY BAYLISS RSC

My name is Sr Dorothy and I am a Sister of Charity. In a developing country at the height of the HIV/AIDS pandemic I had the privilege of working at a small rural hospital in an impoverished area as a nurse/midwife. We had few basic medical supplies, limited staff, no doctor, for over one hundred beds so life was extremely busy.

Frequently I would be called to villages to attend to an emergency. On one of these occasions, I was approached by a young girl asking me if I would go with her to see a sick man not far from where we were. We arrived outside a tin shed, I could hear groaning, as if someone was in pain, but as we tried to enter the shed, we found the door locked with a large padlock and no key in sight.

As I approached the nearest house, I soon found out that the sick man was their son whom they believed to be possessed. The custom was for the possessed person to be isolated, locked up and left to die with no food or water.

Being very sensitive to their beliefs I asked if I could see him. Perhaps I could help him by taking him back to the hospital or would they allow me just to visit. The father came and opened the door, while I was trying to dispel his fears and the myths around sickness. What I then saw before me lying on a dirt floor was a thin, semiconscious man slowly dying from dehydration, HIV/AIDS and other complications.

Trying to hide my bleeding heart and shock, I asked the father if I could take him back to the hospital. "No, it's too expensive and medicine won't help him," I was told. "Maybe then I could give him a blood transfusion?" I tried. "No blood because it's too expensive." I then tried to reassure him that there would be no charge but the father started to become agitated, so I asked if I could just make him comfortable and relieve his pain. Permission was given so I was left alone with the dying man and the young girl.

I gazed gently with compassion on the dejected figure lying before me. All I could do was clean the area around him, gently bathe him, clean his teeth, give him sips of water, relieve his pain and dress the wounds. That being done I asked the girl (I think she was his sister) if I could pray with him. She said, "Yes, he is a Catholic"; so we prayed with him, stroked his brow and promised to return the next day.

Early next morning I collected the Holy Oils and returned to see the patient. After attending to his basic needs, I prayed and blessed him with the Holy Oils and said I would return in the evening, which I did for I knew he wouldn't last the night. So I went back again late afternoon. He seemed comfortable and at peace. Then, taking his hand to pray, he died quietly.

I knew he was at peace, although feeling very sad, I too felt at peace for I knew that he felt loved and cared for, for a short time. What I did was only what Jesus asks of us: *'Love your neighbour as you love yourself.'*