



ON THE FRONTLINE

Alumni of St Patrick's College providing support to all during difficult times

As our entire world is grasping the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic, many healthcare workers are putting themselves at the highest risk while fighting against this virus. Across the country, men and women in the healthcare industry are working long hours, spending time away from their families, and sacrificing their own safety for the greater good of our country. Many of these healthcare workers and chaplains are alumni of St Patrick's College, Maynooth and are working throughout the country and across the world. Each alumnus plays a unique role in the fight against COVID-19 and here at St Patrick's College, Maynooth we are very proud of them.

The Alumni Office was lucky enough to interview two of our own alumni: Julianna Crowley and Fr David Vard. Julianna is currently a healthcare chaplain working at Cork University Hospital (CUH) and Cork University Maternity Hospital (CUMH). Fr David is a priest of the Diocese of Kildare and Leighlin, and based in the parish of Portlaoise which consists of a hospital and two prisons, Midlands Prison and Portlaoise Prison.

Where are you, and what is your daily working life like for you right now?

Julianna: I am a healthcare chaplain working at Cork University Hospital and Cork University Maternity Hospital. As a healthcare chaplain I continue to respond to pastoral and spiritual needs of patients and families in the CUH and CUMH. In recent times I working predominantly in the CUMH with the pregnancy loss services to provide pastoral care and support to parents who experience the loss of their baby. I provide a listening ear, a space for prayer, the sacrament of baptism and pastoral support to help them with any questions they may have.

Fr. David: At the moment my day revolves around the celebration of daily Mass in the mornings, being on hospital duty, which involves being on call, and trying to reach out to my parishioners, whether this be answering their requests or concerns, by phone or email, or planning a liturgy that we can broadcast via our webcam, parish radio or Shalom World TV.

How is your current role helping those suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic?

Julianna: The chaplaincy department provides pastoral care to patients and families of both the CUH and the CUMH during the most difficult and challenging moments in their life. During the COVID-19 pandemic the chaplaincy team and I continue to be available to all patients and families during these most difficult days. Being a patient in hospital carries a lot of worries and anxieties, fears and distress and ordinarily many have the support and comfort of families and friends. However during the pandemic patients feel very alone as they do not have the comfort of having a family or friend by their bedside. As I am predominantly working in pregnancy loss in Cork University Maternity Hospital I provide pastoral care and support to mothers and fathers and their families. I support parents and their baby who has died with prayers and a space for spiritual reflection through conversation and a listening ear.



Above: Julianna at Cork City University Hospital

Fr David: A huge part of my parish ministry is dealing with the sick and dying and with the bereaved. This hasn't really changed but the way I go about this has changed. We have much less face to face contact with people, which is proving to be challenging. As a priest, I can provide the sacraments of the Church to someone who is suffering from COVID-19 and in conjunction with the hospitals and care facilities we have largely been able to do so. It has meant getting familiar with putting on and taking off PPE gear. It means that I can't go anywhere in the hospital without wearing a surgical mask and or carry with me protective eye wear just in case I am called into a patient with COVID-19 or with suspected COVID 19.

Of course, my role doesn't just stop at sacraments, I am there, not only for the patients but also for their families and indeed the staff of the hospital, nursing homes and care facilities. This really came into focus for me over the Easter weekend when a local care home was struck with a cluster of cases of COVID-19 and in the space of 24 hours eight people had tragically lost their lives to the virus. I was not able to go into the ward of the care home where these patients were being cared for but found myself being the chaplain to the nurses, doctors and carers who had carried outside the building as I said prayers and gave people a space (following social distancing of course) to be together and united in prayer for the people they love and care for.



Since the outbreak I have had several funerals of someone who has died of COVID-19. Providing a Requiem Mass, is something that has proven very comforting for families and is something that I am glad to be able to do, even though it is under strict restrictions.

Left: Fr David preparing for a live webcam Mass during this COVID-19 pandemic.

What difficulties have you faced since the outbreak of the pandemic?

Julianna: I work in a extremely busy hospital environment and this pandemic has brought many difficulties and challenges. Day in day out I meet patients, families and staff who share with me their worries, anxieties, hopes and heartbreak and often I respond to such distress with appropriate touch or a hug. However during these times one of the strictest recommendations is to distance yourself from others. I have found it difficult not being able to give that hug to someone who is heartbroken. It is important that such a recommendation is adhered to however I have come to realise appropriate touch is such important part of my identity as a healthcare chaplain. The disarming handshake, the encouraging pat on the shoulder to keep fighting, the embrace of a comforting hug for a someone who grieves or celebration of good news. Actions speak louder than words but right now words are all I have.

Fr David: While funerals have provided families with a great sense of comfort they are also a great area of personal challenge. I find that there is far less interaction with the bereaved, both in my involvement of the planning of a Requiem Mass but also in my ability to express my sympathy.

This has been one of the main difficulties since the outbreak of the pandemic. Things have changed so fast that we are really thinking on our feet as we come across these new realities and strive to be Christ like to all we meet. I think funerals best describe the main difficulty that I am facing at the moment. How can I meet with my parishioners? How can I interact with them when all the usual avenues are closed off?

How have you overcome these difficulties?

Julianna: I am restricted from visiting many patients who I would ordinarily visit across both hospitals. I am currently contacting long term patients who are currently at home through telephone calls and messages to let them know that I continue to think of them. The Chaplaincy Department provides a high quality service to patients, their families and staff however, my colleagues are encountering the same difficulties and we work together to find a solution. As difficult as it is for my colleagues and I, the patients I sit with and the parents who grief for their little baby come first.

Fr David: I don't think I have overcome any of my current challenges but I am trying to. The change in society, in ministry has happened so quickly that it is important to try new things all the time, to try and adapt. To use a very real example - funerals. What can I now do around the preparation of a Requiem Mass? Do I meet the family and maintain social distancing, or does that seem cold? Do I interact with them over the phone only? What do I do when they want me to say the Rosary and prayers in their house the night before? These are the small things that matter to people, and my response has been changing and evolving these last few weeks.

It is also important for me to rely on my own spiritual life, to make sure that I am keeping my routine, in terms of prayer and the Divine Office. Someone once compared selfcare to the oxygen mask they tell you about on airplanes, make sure yours is on right before you assist anyone else with theirs. My prayer life is my oxygen mask.

Right: Before the COVID-19 pandemic Fr David had a very busy ministry life as seen here at a Baptism ceremony in February.



How do you feel having studied at St Patrick's College, Maynooth (SPCM) has prepared you in your current role in battling against the COVID-19 pandemic?

Julianna: This pandemic and lockdown has certainly made me question what is life all about when a deadly virus has the ability to stop us all in our tracks and change life as we know it. Whilst many choices have been taken from us we do have a choice in how we respond during this current crisis.



Above: Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Julianna seen here discussing patients' health and how they can help them on their journey to recovery.

SPCM has provided me with life skills, an ability to respond appropriately to quandaries, to reflect through the widest possible perspective, to respond carefully and to not to react quickly, and to persevere in times of difficulties. These are only some of the ways that SPCM has prepared me in my role as a healthcare chaplain but more importantly it instilled in me the importance of leaning on my faith when times get tough. Each and everyday the news on the tv and radio and across social media is negative, hopeless and mostly scary. But we have to keep the faith and remain hopeful. The light will overcome the darkness and this too will pass.

Fr David: I can remember one of my lecturers telling us that people love to see a priest. They love to see a priest when they are at their happiest moments but also when they are at their saddest and lowest moments. If my presence can help someone is anyway then I will try my best to be present. That doesn't mean that I know just what to say or do, but that I am there in the person of Christ, hopefully bringing some light and/or hope to the situation. If SPCM has taught me anything it has taught me that it is important to be present.



St Patrick's College, Maynooth
Alumni Office
email: alumni@spcm.ie
or visit maynoothcollege.ie