

**Excerpt from the Testimony by Fr. Vincent Nagle at the CL NL Summer Holiday
Altenberg, Odenthal, 27 July 2026**



Pieter Bruegel de Oude, Caritas - Werken van barhartigheid, 1559, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam
Detail: "Visiting the sick" and "Sheltering the homeless"

Emma: My question is related to your recent work of accompanying people in severe sickness. I am inclined to see something that makes you suffer as personal, private. Something that is given to you only. At the same time I clearly experience that I would like to be accompanied precisely into and across pain. I would really like not to be alone. And nevertheless the particular fact causing suffering happens to me and only to me. What does it mean to be truly accompanied across pain and suffering, and across the dramas in life? It is surely very different to go through them alone or not.

Fr. Vincent Nagle: I will begin by saying that I have really discovered that companionship is the dynamic of salvation. This is really true.

What about a situation in which no one can be with you in front of a particular thing that makes you suffer?

No one can be with you in that memory, in that pain, in that fear, in the terror of your mortality, in your terror of losing your treasures in life, losing the people you love, losing yourself, as I did in those years of madness and drugs. I mean, I could never go back to study. I lost half of my brain, really. I cannot organize my day. I simply can't. I have two people who call me during the day to remind me what I have to do. I lost my mind. I lost my mind and I used to have a mind that people admired. I do not anymore.

Then, losing our treasures, right? Losing my mobility, losing my children, losing my spouse,

losing my friends, losing my family. We are going to lose them all. We are already losing them all right now. It is a countdown to losing everything. It is not just something that could happen, it is "in the contract" and we are simply terrified.

But who can be with you in that terror, in your terror? As you say your treasures are your treasures, not theirs. My health, my ability, my vocation, my home, my work, my friends, my reputation.

I have read "*The Lord of the Rings*" 27 times and only when I was working in Palestine I discovered that the whole purpose of his work - Tolkien wrote it explicitly: he said that all true stories are about death because that's the question - the whole purpose of his work is the question: is mortality better than immortality? Elves or men? Arwen or Aragorn?

By the way, let me say in a parenthesis, the most beautiful and the most beautifully written love story I have ever read in my life is in the appendices of "*The Lord of the Rings*". It is the story of the love between Arwen and Aragorn. A few pages that are very dramatic, very sad, very beautiful, wonderful. The question is mortality. Is it better to be an elf or a man? Mortal or immortal? The story is very dramatic and very, very beautiful. Go, read it tonight. Tonight. End of parenthesis.

But to answer your question the evident beauty of this movement in the Church - and of the Church itself - of this movement in the Church called Communion and Liberation, is that it is a companionship. Where can you live a companionship like this one? I have had a lot of experiences in my life and I tell you: "no way. This is it. This is it".

I have seen wonderful other Christian and Catholic experiences. I admire so much something like Opus Dei, for example. Looking at companionship: do they enjoy being with each other? Well, it is nice. I guess they do. Still a companionship like ours is truly a unique gift that came to us through Father Giussani.

What did Father Giussani say about companionship? Well, one of the things he said about companionship, is: "woe" - that is an ancient word that we just use in the Bible and in Shakespeare. Something like "*guai*" in Italian and I don't know in a lot of other languages... - Anyway it means "poor you". Back to don Giussani's words: "poor you if you come to our companionship for the companionship itself". At some point you will feel betrayed or disappointed or let down, because we are just sinners who need to be saved by the infinite mercy of God. There is no one here who is not in desperate need of the mercy of God. No one.

Don Giussani tells us: "poor you, woe to you, if you come here for the companionship". Why? What is then the purpose of the companionship? Here is where I want to answer your question. The companionship is the place where we come to be in love and in relationship with the One who we are with when we are *not* with the companions. When we are in front of our destiny, in front of infinity, we are in front of mystery. Who is there? Whose face is there, in that terrible abyss? Whose face is there in that dark abyss of mystery? That is what the companionship is for. If it is not that, then it will become a disappointment in our life, a pain in our life, a prison in our life, not our liberation. Our communion will not be our liberation unless it becomes the discovery of the face of Another. The One who is still with us when we are *not* together. He is with us when we are together and the companionship allows us to recognize, to come to know that face so that we can recognize Him always and ask for Him always, in particular also when we are alone. The companionship is not the answer. He is the answer. The companionship is the sacrament of His presence. Again: the

companionship is the sacrament of His presence. So that when we are not accompanied, we still know who we are with and who is with us.

I discovered this one specific day. I work with severely ill people. And three of the structures that I am a chaplain for - I am a chaplain for many different structures - three of these structures are for AIDS patients. We do not hear much about AIDS anymore because now there is a regime of treatment. It does not cure AIDS, but it can allow you to live a relatively normal life under the condition that you follow the program, the regime. To this end you need to have an organized life. The problem is that a lot of people who get sick with AIDS do not have an organized life; they have a very chaotic life. They are prostitutes, male prostitutes, trans prostitutes, drug users and pushers. They are often people who have burned a lot of bridges in their life. They end up alone and they realize that they are dying. That is when I meet them. They may have a long time to die because we help them get on the regime, but they are already very, very, very ill.

One day it was in Lent, it was Friday and I was talking about Jesus on the cross. We were looking at some pictures of the Shroud of Turin. One of the people there said - I can't remember the exact words - but he said something like: "you know, when I am suffering that much, I am just going to have someone kill me." They all went like this. I asked: "why?" Their answer was not: "because I do not want the pain, the pain will be too bad." The answer was also not: "because I will not be able to afford the medicines" or something like that. The answer was and is always the same: "because I know I will be alone. I know I will be alone". This is the deciding factor of hope. Because my brothers and sisters - if I may call you that, though I am getting pretty old... Maybe I could just say my sons and daughters - why do we feel alone? Why do we feel that this world is against us? That my life is against me? That my existence is against me? Because I do not find Him there. Why don't I find Him there? Because I do not want to be there myself. I do not want to be there. Why don't I want to be there? Because there is death, there is pain, there is humiliation, there is betrayal. I don't want to be there. I just want things to be different.

Do you guys know what hell is? Hell is the place where all of our dreams and fantasies come true. That is hell. Do you know why it is hell? Because you do not meet anybody. Nobody. You are alone. Why are you alone? Don't we have fantasies and dreams about parties and being together and laughing and dancing and other things? Yes, but in our fantasy, there is no room for another person the way he or she is. There is only room for the other person the way I want him or her to be. Hell is where everything is just the way you want it to be, but you don't meet anyone, there is no connection. That is called hell.

And heaven is where none of your dreams comes true, but you have an encounter that just blows you apart. And it goes on blowing you apart because it is always more, more than you can know or accept. Therefore, it is asking you to change and grow and suffer and open up, and it is always more.

I have slowly learnt what companionship is. Companionship does not mean having people near me. All of us share the experience of being among other people and feeling completely and utterly alone and abandoned. Has that ever happened to you? The others were there, but that did not mean that we had the experience of a companionship.

I have discovered that companionship needs two factors to be there.

The first factor is that the person who comes near does not censor anything. He or she looks at it all together with you. So many people come close while you are suffering and they say:

“oh, let us talk about something happy”. Or: “let us go out to a concert or a movie”. Nothing wrong with that. Those can be positive experiences, but they do not give you the experience of being accompanied, right? I am not talking against saying: “hey, let us go out and do something funny or entertaining or beautiful”. The only point is that those proposals do not bring a companionship. The first factor is someone who is willing to look at reality with you as it is, with all of its death and pain and solitude. I have sometimes insisted on staying in a room when a paralyzed person needed to relieve his bowels. A paralyzed person has no muscles below the neck. To relieve his bowels it is necessary to go into the bowels and empty them. It is not a pleasant process. I have sometimes insisted to stay there so the person will know that I am looking at it all with him or her.

Let us move to the second factor. I will be using a Christian word that I usually do not use, because it is a “big” word. I will then give you also an easier one. Using the “big” word, the second factor is hope. But let us use a more easily manageable word: a “positive hypothesis”. What does that mean? Being with the other person with the hypothesis that it is worth living like this, in the situation in which the other person is. In which way is it worth living like this? I do not know. Let us be here together and see, and discover.

This is my experience of having accompanied hundreds and hundreds of people: I am with them, we talk, I listen and observe. At a certain point, I can say, “Did you hear that? Did you see that? Do you understand what you just said? Or what has just happened? Or what have you just told me? Don’t you see that this is an answer to what you have been saying? You needed me there - perhaps - to see it, but I did not do it. I just was able to point it out, to draw your attention to it”.

Sometimes I am asked to go into situations that are really dramatic: suicide, violence, abandonment, pain. Of course I am afraid. Sometimes I am afraid because something in me says: “what can I do?” Well, I can do nothing except asking God for the grace to really be there. To be there, intimately there, truly there. Adhering, clinging to that circumstance, not protecting myself from it, not separating myself from it, not censoring it.

What did we preach about today during the Holy Mass? The loin cloth, the thing that clings to the man’s genitals. I am sorry, that is what a loin cloth is, right? God said to Jeremiah: “that is the symbol of my people, how I want them to cling to me”. That is dramatic, isn’t it? It is not a candy caramel. I am saying that if we can be there with the other person, not censoring and with a positive hypothesis, in some way we are going to discover how this is not against us, not against her, not against him, not against them. I have had that experience again and again and again and again.

I will give one example. I know it is late, but we need this example to recognize that we are often missing reality. We are missing our desire for reality. We have no desire for reality. We have a desire for the world the way we want it to be, not the world the way it is. I hear so many Catholics and Christians say: “we are here to change the world”. Well, screw you, screw you, screw you! There is nothing more anti-Christian than that. Is that what Jesus did? Did Jesus change the world? What problems did He solve? Please tell me, tell me right now.

No, our mission is infinitely greater and more transformative than that. Our mission - together with Jesus - is to love the world just as it is. That is what changes everything.

How did this journey begin for me? Someone loved me in all my brutality and violence and ugliness and sacrificed himself for me just the way I was. That is what changed me. I did change because He changed me. What changed me is that He loved me without directly

acting to change me.

This is mostly the way in which we are in reality: we are telling God how we wish it were, right? This is not what Titus Brandsma¹ did. That is not what St. Paul did. When he was in Dachau Titus was known for his incredible care and service to others. As he was dying, he sacrificed himself for the others. By the way, the biography I read of Titus Brandsma tells that he was killed by lethal injection, not that he died of his weakness in old age as apparently some media state. I do not know the reason of this discrepancy. I read in his life an invitation to adhere to reality. What is reality? Reality is the place of the encounter with God. The point is that we are not reconciled to reality. Why do we feel so alone? Because we are not together in one place. We are in the same place, but everyone is in one's own fantasy. As we do not have the same fantasy, we are not together.

In the end, it is just about looking at things - truly looking at them, as they are - together and with a positive hypothesis. We will find that positive hypothesis. It is already there. It just wants to be recognized. He will show it to us.

Now - finally - the actual example. A month ago, one of my guys whom I really loved - I truly loved him, I really loved him - died. The first time I met him he first thing he told me was: "I don't believe in God. I do not want to hear about God. You see on this paper that I have already purchased the service to be put to death when I think it is time. I am not going to be humiliated and put in pain and all that".

I answered: "Let us just start to talk, to see together how the things are, you know". He was a very lovable guy, a truly lovable guy. As I said, I loved him. I really loved him. Though, a couple of times, I lost my temper with him. He told me: "you have got to work on that". I answered: "yes, you are right, I really do". We were talking about Palestine and I had really lost my temper. But we walked together. One time he called his doctor for her to come and put him to death. She was not there. I was present when she called back. They made the appointment right in front of me. I said: "well, I am not going to be here. I am going out of town to give a talk. Please, have it the next day so that way I can come back and we can see each other before you do that". He answered: "okay". On that night I went back to the parish. I called all of my friends. We got together, about 150 of us, and we prayed all evening up until late in front of the Holy Sacrament, praying for him. Then I flew at 5:00 AM to give this talk, and I came back and I went to see him. He told me: "uh, you will never guess what happened. You know, you left, and a couple of hours later, I was on the phone with a friend of mine, talking with him. Suddenly, it occurred to me, that I couldn't go ahead. I am still alive. I am living. This is life". It was exactly at the time when we were praying all together in front of the Holy Sacrament.

From that moment he opened his heart. The next week he told me: "I need to confess". I answered: "well, you know, I am a priest and I can say the words, but the only One who can forgive you is God. So, we are going to do that with God. You are aware, right?" He said: "okay".

He fell in love with Our Lady, he fell in love with Carlo Acutis... Carlo Acutis who was his neighbor. Yes that family was a neighbor of his family. He just fell in love with everything. He fell in love with the Eucharist. He fell in love with the Eucharistic miracles in the site by Carlo Acutis.

Still, every once in a while he would go back to desperation and call his doctor. A large part

¹ The Dutch saint whose liturgical memory is celebrated on the very day of the testimony, namely on July, 27.

of it was that he had left his family several years ago: his two sons and his wife. One son and his ex-wife hated him for it. They hated him. He was a very likable guy, but he just did not like to argue. He really could not stand arguing. He could not do it and did not want to do it. It was hell for him. But his wife argued with him. It was hell for him. And he did not see why he should suffer so much, and he left. He was very rich, very good-looking, very affable. The women loved him. "Why am I staying with her? She hates me, you know". He had a very nice life, but he could not stay with the women for the reason I mentioned earlier: they were not according to his fantasy, right?

His remaining great pain was that they hated him so much. There was such and hostility. He told me: "there is nothing I can do because they will not talk to me anymore. They will not answer... There is truly nothing I can do. There is nothing I can do. I am going to call my doctor..."

I answered him: "There is actually something you can do. You know what you can do? The same thing that human beings have always done to prove to someone else that they do love him or her. What does a human being do when there is nothing he can say? What does he do to prove to someone that he loves him or her? It is called sacrifice. Sacrifice. What did God do to us when we did not want to listen to Him anymore, and there were no words that He could say to us? What did God do? He sacrificed Himself. He sacrificed His Son. This is something that we cannot ignore". I went on: "you are suffering here. Every week - not really every week - you tell me you do not want to be here. You want to take an exit. You want to get the fast ticket out of here. But what if you stayed for them, for your wife and for your son?"

He answered: "how would they know?"

I told him: "who knows? But if you are doing it, there is something you are suffering for. You are staying here for them, to be near them, to leave open the opportunity for reconciliation with them. You are suffering out of love for them".

We started to look at that. He made enormous steps. The week before he died, he said something to me that was amazing. He recalled something I had told him much earlier, something along these lines: "you are a really nice guy. You are a great guy, but you have lived for yourself." He repeated my words and then he added: "Yes, I have. I have indeed. But do you know what is happening to me right now in these weeks? I never believed it could happen. I can see it. I can see it in this sacrifice. I can see my heart coming out of my body and going towards someone else. I can see it happening. I never thought it was possible".

He died suddenly. It was not a slow decline. He was sick and he suddenly died about five days after that conversation. When I had met him first, he was so full of anguish, he was ugly. When he died, he was so beautiful. He was so beautiful. He was present to his reality because he had found mercy there, by begging for it. Begging mercy for himself, for his family, for the world.

I find that when I am with people asking these questions, I can just help them to recognize what God is showing them about their life. That they can feel that they are not alone, not just because I am with them. That (also) through my being with them, they discover that Someone is really talking to them. Someone is really accompanying them. Someone is really showing them that this is worth it. It is really worth it. I hope I have answered your question.