

My name is Steve Collins, and I experienced Cursillo #43 in 1991, 34 years ago, at St. Paul of the Cross parish in North Palm Beach, where I sat at the table of St. Peter. My wife Pam and I worship here at St. Bernadette in PSL, and at St. Bernadette in Linville, N.C.

In Luke Chapter 10, we read the familiar Parable of the Good Samaritan. Beginning with the greatest commandment: (Read Luke 25-37.)

On September 26<sup>th</sup> of last year, Hurricane Helene made landfall in the Big Bend of Florida, as a Category 4 Storm, the fifth hurricane of the 2024 hurricane season. The storm rapidly weakened to a Cat 2 storm as it moved into Georgia, and eventually a tropical depression, stalled over the Appalachian and Blue Ridge mountains and east Tennessee. The storm dissipated some three days after the original landfall in Florida, killing some 250 persons in its path, including 108 in North Carolina. However, In the days BEFORE landfall in the mountains, the ground was saturated with 24" of rain, which allowed for river flooding, unstable ground, and eventual mudslides, landslides, and downed trees, from Hendersonville and Asheville, east to Marion, and then north into Avery and Watauga counties. In Avery County N.C. six died, and one remains missing.

In our second home of Avery County, the devastation included the river basins of the Watauga, Toe, Linville, and Elk Rivers; with multiple landslides and mudslides throughout the county. The resort town of Banner Elk, which nestles the Sugar Mountain and Beech Mountain Ski Resorts, became an island, when all three roads in or out of town collapsed. If you can imagine riverbank erosion significant enough to wash a home down the river, consider that this scenario happened not once but twice in our county during this catastrophic event, both on the Toe River and the Elk River. In each distinct case, family members were trapped in the floating homes, and one of these cases is tied to the sole remaining missing person in Avery County. In fact, a second missing person was just recovered on March 31<sup>st</sup>.

As Pam and I in Florida monitored events via social media, it soon became apparent that the situation was dire, particularly in North Carolina. We believed that our neighborhood was spared from the brunt of the storm, yet we sought some assurance, nonetheless.

I retired from Palm Beach County in 2022, from 33 years of fire department work in Florida, with an additional 10 volunteer EMS and fire service years in NY. During my career, I have had extensive experience in disaster response, area command and incident management team experience. Always warned in our industry not to let your job define you as a person, many struggle to find identity or purpose after retirement. This couldn't possibly affect me, could it? I had another life after all. I had thirty years of music ministry experience here in the diocese, Cursillo and church friends, Florida friends and North Carolina friends, and the rest of my life to ski, travel, drink bourbon, and perform or write music, or take up new hobbies. In a historical

sense though, I had struggled with identity. After all, the hospital I was born in closed down many years ago. My catholic grammar school closed down many years ago. The paramedic school I graduated from closed down, the college I graduated from renamed themselves a “university”, as did my grad school, and my first four employers in EMS no longer exist. It was clear to me that my academic or professional existence was slowly being erased. Some things remained tried and true: my identity as a firefighter, paramedic, mountain-climbing ski patroller from the Hudson Valley, a church going Catholic, and a second-generation Cursillista. I still remember the Tuesday night group reunions in my parent’s home for 30 years. I remember my introduction to music ministry, when as a kid I played tambourine to a little Spanish folk song at Cursillo closings, or Closures, graduating to the folk mass where the music directors were Cursillo friends of my parents. I remember Hudson Valley influences like folk music, Woodstock, clam bakes, sailing the Hudson, and tubing the Esopus River.

Now at retirement, I decided to reinvent myself by regressing to my youth, rejoining the National Ski Patrol after a 35-year hiatus, and though I no longer needed it, renewing both my National Registry and Florida Paramedic licenses, after retirement. In fact, I have remained a credentialed Paramedic for 41 years, to this day. And now, with whatever professional identity might be left, I thought I might be able to offer help in this devastating time.

During our scouring of social media, I became aware of an NGO (non-governmental org) that was soliciting financial support and volunteers for emergency response work in N.C. The Carolina Emergency Response Team seemed to be made up of people like myself, ICS trained active duty and retired fire department personnel, who would set up a field hospital and FBO operation out of the Hickory N.C. regional airport, with the intent to fly rescue and supply missions into the mountains via private helicopter. I telephoned the number for volunteers, and after identifying myself, and my credentials, was encouraged to report for an assignment in Hickory the following evening. The requested supplies and urgent needs included money for aircraft fuel, medical supplies, and insulin in particular. As the parents of a Type 1 diabetic, we enjoy a network of families and resources for diabetes supplies, and as I packed a go-bag for my trip, Pam activated our support network, and drove to PBC to pick up donated insulin, test kits, syringes, needles, glucometers, and related equipment. I left the following morning, driving 10 hours to Hickory, and reported to the airport. I turned over some \$10,000 in donated diabetes supplies from our Florida friends, met team leaders, and secured an assignment for the following day. I then went and checked in to the nearest hotel room, some 10 miles away.

Now I know from experience that work in these environments requires discipline, a sense of humor, and a willingness to follow orders. No one wants to hear how qualified you may think you are, or how you might do it differently. To be successful on this mission, one might consider the Cursillo Leaders Prayer, and “seek by preference the most humble tasks”. The environment

was dynamic, the tarmac transitioning from privately owned air ships, to Blackhawk helicopters, and Chinooks, the flight personnel changing from individual and EMS paramedics, to national guard, to active duty soldiers, and within a week, to FEMA personnel. I spent five days working in Hickory, and remained flexible, working triage and patient care, where each weathered and shell-shocked face seemed to yearn to tell a story- most, however, told in deafening silence. I eventually transitioned to medical logistics, and eventually became the liaison for oxygen, insulin and diabetes supplies. My arrival was met with a tentative welcome by the nursing team five days earlier, yet when I finally left Hickory to check our own homes for storm damage, I received hugs from the nursing supervisors, with an invitation to stop in on my way back south. Enroute to the mountains, I had no idea that I would spend only an additional 16 hours there, heading back to Florida the next morning to address the incoming Hurricane Milton. Milton, which spawned an EF3 tornado that traveled within ½ mile of our Ft. Pierce home, after roaring through our neighborhood with the distinctive freight train sound, killed 6 persons in a community up the road from us. While I didn't admit it aloud, the one-two punch of the storms, combined with my response efforts and 1400 miles on the road, was now taking an emotional toll, and I was glad to be back home, with my wife, and the busy work of tornado damaged fences to keep me occupied.

In the following days, I had the occasion to speak with a friend who currently serves on the Secretariat for Palm Beach Cursillo, who suggested that my experiences in North Carolina might make for an Ultreya Witness talk. After a follow-up from a second secretariat member, I reluctantly said yes. I was busy working four days a week in my volunteer job as a Ski Patroller and Patrol Instructor through much of the winter, though this request to witness at an Ultreya never left the back of my mind. Like anything else further down on your to-do list, I had more time to think about it, and all that comes with it: my personal story, the potential for the Lord to use me as his instrument, all the ways I might fail in doing so. The dread of retelling a story with so many "I"s in it, that I would need my longtime Cursillo companions to remind me that: "it's not about you, Steve!" And indeed, it's not about me. It is about all of US, our role as Catholics, Christians, Cursillistas, our responsibility to evangelize, to bear witness to Christ's love through ACTION. After all, how is my volunteer disaster service for a week in retirement more important than all the years I served before retirement? Does this work diminish or disrespect the memory of other lives saved, or babies delivered, or patients assisted, over the past 40 years? Of course not. How could it. Every opportunity to be a good Samaritan, with or without a preceding hurricane, is an opportunity to share the love of Christ. "They'll know we are Christians by our love!" the song exclaims. This evangelization can be lived out by any of us- in parish ministries, or a soup kitchen, food pantry, Habitat for Humanity, or simply in handing out cheeseburger coupons to the panhandler at the traffic light. One thing is for certain: our commitment to Christ requires us to be Christ to others in their time of need. In a world so hurting and confused,

polarized and marginalized; are we not called to be the **metaphorical hands, eyes, and voice of Christ? I will caution you, though.** Be careful in being Christ to others. If you're too good at it, it might generate some buzz. I wrote an article about this concept 30 years ago, and the truth is the same 30 years later. I have here a copy of it for each of you.

Matthew 25:40 states: "Whatsoever you do for the least of my brothers, you do unto me." In the distraction of today's world, we are sometimes consumed by the wrong priorities. We recently had out-of-town friends visiting us here in Florida, and my friend joined me on the porch one evening for a drink. Knowing we both share a Christian identity, he somehow assumed he knew my personal politics or religious denomination. He lamented out loud that things will be better "when we get rid of all the foreigners." I sat silently, took a moment to bite my lip, and then I replied: "Foreigners...you mean like the good Samaritan?" In an awkward moment, I summoned the courage to speak my truth. It shouldn't require courage, however, to stand up for ALL of God's people. Gentle correction, or plain old persuasion, are sometimes called for in our Christian walk. Friends, I implore you: Don't be the 'you' the world wants you to be, be the 'you' God created you to be.

Of course, before we can be Christ to others, or even a good Samaritan, we need pray about it, get up off the couch, and turn off the Television! For it is only when we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8), that we will ever truly be the best versions of ourselves.

***"We the hands, we the eyes, we the voice of Christ. Oh, faithful God we entrust, our treasure to your heart."***

***God bless you.***