



Chaplain Richard Brennan confers with nurse practitioner Heidi Fritz on which ICU patients and families will need his services. Brennan said he's glad to be of service for COVID-19 patients, those who care for them at the hospital, and those who love them. BENEFIS PHOTO

Chaplain is 'peace amid the chaos'

He's there to support patients, staff at Benefis Health System

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It's 10 a.m., and Benefis Chaplain Richard Brennan has arrived in the Intensive Care Unit at Benefis Health System for rounds.

Nurse practitioner Heidi Fritz reviews with him the patients in need of his attention, based on their families' requests for support.

After the status update, Brennan asks Fritz how she's doing. He has become an important support person for the Benefis employees on the front lines of the COVID-19 fight. The health system's mental health team also helps staff cope.

"I'm just here to be with folks in their journey," Brennan says.

Two patients will be taken off their ventilators, unable to recover from the effects of the coronavirus. One patient is Catholic, and his family has asked that Richard offer the anointing of the sick, the sacrament more commonly known as last rites.

"A lot of our patients have need of ventilators, and that puts their care on an uncomfortable pause. We can't predict how it will progress from there," Brennan says. "We watch and hope and pray."

The patient Brennan will visit is in isolation to prevent the spread of COVID-19, as are most patients in the ICU. That is a heartbreaking reality for their families and the only way to protect them and the community at large.

Sarah White, a registered nurse, brings Brennan small cups for the sacrament. He asks how she's coping. She shrugs and says, "This is a little more than usual to handle."

"You amaze me, all of you," Brennan tells her.

White says having the chaplain on the floor every day "just being present and checking on us" is important. Their feet are tired. It's discouraging how hard this disease is for some people to survive.

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Richard Brennan, Benefis chaplain

"You know someone is praying for them, and it gives us peace amid the chaos," she said. "It's nice to know we're not all alone in this."

Outside the patient's glass door, covered in warning signs, Brennan puts on protective gown. First come the gloves, then a plastic gown, a hair bonnet, and another pair of gloves. He wears two masks and eye protection.

"I all but disappear in this gear," he said. People know who he is even under the protective gear as soon as he speaks. His Dublin, Ireland, heritage is betrayed by his accent.

Brennan moved to Montana with his wife, Dr. Bridget Brennan, who is the Benefis Medical Group chief medical officer. He became a registry chaplain, filling in as needed for the past six years.

Brennan has ministered to people for more than 30 years, first as a priest until his marriage. He never expected to have the chance to meet such a need as the hospital is experiencing now.

"I'm here for emergencies like this, to be with people in their extreme need," he says. "My role is to support the families and the caregivers."

At 59, Brennan is younger than Benefis' full-time chaplains. He has decided to go into harm's way so they aren't put at risk and can minister to other patients and their families.

"I'm grateful to be able to be helpful. It's wonderful to be useful," Richard says.

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Chaplain

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Inside this isolation room in the ICU, Brennan connects with the patient, speaking to him and offering his services. The patient responds with his eyes, accepting the sacrament.

Richard anoints him with oil and offers him what comfort and peace he can.

Normally, Brennan's next step would be attending rounds on the COVID floor via phone with the doctors. Today, however, the doctors will take notes on who needs him, and Richard will spend the morning on this patient's needs.

After the sacrament, Brennan reviews the next step for the patient with his care team.

"If anything happens, and you need me, call," he says.

Outside the ICU, Brennan sits with the patient's family and introduces himself.

"We are very concerned about how things are going," he tells them. "I have been here every day he's been here, and he's not getting better."

The man is being kept alive only by machines, his laboring prolonged. Richard is with them as they cry.

"It's not the end. It's part of our journey, but we have more. We are more," Richard tells them. "I'm here for you. God will be with us, and we will get through this."

Brennan walks back into the ICU. The family has accepted the reality of their loved one's situation, he tells the care team. Richard connects with Dr. Ryan Luoma, a palliative care physician, who will oversee the end and also talk with the family.

Brennan returns to the ICU and puts the protective gear back on and steps into the patient's room. He says the rosary via FaceTime, and the family recites the words together. Richard holds the phone so they can see the patient's face.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death ..."

He will return later to the ICU to spend time with another patient at his family's request.

Next, Brennan checks in at the chaplain's office at the E.L. Weigand Chapel between Benefis North and South towers. Chaplain Ray Larson is there, too. One of Benefis' full-time chaplains with Father Raphael Chiacia, Larson tended to COVID patients in the spring but appreciates that Richard has taken on that role now.

"It's just outstanding. We appreciate our brother stepping up to the plate," he says.

In the afternoon, Brennan will lead the funeral service for a woman who died in the Emergency Department. She, like an increasing number of the people who walk into Benefis, didn't have a church affiliation.

The chaplains are on the job for everyone and, as Larson says, "We go where they are."

"We're here for everybody, and we all have the same boss," he adds with a head tip up.

Larson considers chaplains as the spirit and mind part of the equation of the Benefis mission of "healing body, mind, and spirit."

Brennan says the patients are a blessing to him, teaching him about our relationship with God.

"We are blessed," he says.



Benefis Chaplain Richard Brennan puts on layers of protective gear as he prepares to minister to a dying patient in the Benefis Health System Intensive Care Unit. Because the patient's family couldn't join him to prevent the spread of COVID-19, Brennan video streamed the rosary with them from the patient's bedside. BENEFIS PHOTO