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## Covid-19 and Advent. Don Paolo Mulas (chaplain in Sassari): “Close to patients needing care and love as God who comes to us as a newborn child”

“Last night, at 2:30 a.m., a patient told me he was afraid he might be intubated. He asked me to stay with him until then and I was there for him. Being there is important, feeling the pain and the fear of the sick and attending to their needs with love”. Father **Paolo Mulas**, 33, served for almost three years as chaplain of the University Hospital of Sassari (AOU), he described the first days of an unprecedented Advent season amidst the second wave of the pandemic. **“It's important to be there for patients and healthcare workers alike”**, he said. For Don Paolo, unlike last spring, the latter's discouragement is now perceivable: “It's far worse now than it was last March. At the time the situation was serious but fairly manageable, whereas today over 150 patients are hospitalized.” In addition, “when they enter the ward, patients are extremely strained. As compared to the first wave of the virus they are more aware of the disease, and afraid of loneliness and death.



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Also "healthcare workers are on their last legs, especially those in ICUs." On top of this, according to Don Paolo, doctors and nurses perceive a lack of solidarity from public opinion: "Healthcare workers need to feel they are being supported; they don't consider themselves heroes but professionals who work with diligence and dedication. I realize that they no longer see appreciation from all those who sustained them in the past months." Thus Father Paolo offers his support to them too: "They come up to me for counsel. Every day I meet with six to seven of them."

**“As a priest, there is no other place where I would rather be right now”.**

he said, feeling part of the medical team: “Together we are reflecting on the process that extends from healing to caring, mindful of the fact that not all patients will recover, but all of

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them must feel that they are not alone, that we are taking care of them." It is equally necessary "to support healthcare workers who feel helpless, even though they did all they could, but nevertheless feel overwhelmed by the death of a patient." With the permission of the bishop and taking the relevant safety precautions, Don Paolo brings Communion to the wards: "In Infectious Disease Units," he said,

**we turned a safe into a tabernacle where the blessed wafers are stored.**

**Receiving Communion every day is a great consolation for those who request it.** Don Paolo, now virtually resident in the hospital - "my small 20m<sup>2</sup> office is now also a study and bedroom" - attends to the patients and sustains them, and not only spiritually. "I bring them newspapers, and if their relatives can't go out of the house, I go to their homes to take a change of clothes or other necessities." These acts of caring are also offered to families, who tell him: "Father, please give him a caress on our behalf, tell him that all the family is thinking of him." Other times he is the one who brakes the news to families that their loved ones have died. He is a very pragmatic priest: "Those who suffer need gestures. Faith is expressed through prayer and the sacraments, yet also through our concrete actions." Last Saturday, while celebrating Mass in the maternity ward as he does every week, he said: *"This is the first day of Advent, and more than ever, in the present circumstances, we are discovering that Christmas is concreteness, it consists in caring for a God who comes to us as a newborn child and needs our care, our love, our hands. Just like our patients".* **Love for the sick becomes catechesis:** a young COVID-19 patient asked to receive her First Communion in the ward, which she never did before. "She received it yesterday, in the presence of the medical staff. It was a very moving experience for all of us."



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"They obviously hope to be home for the festivities. Their greatest concern is having to spend Christmas here, away from their families. We are reflecting on what we could arrange. We are considering communal moments of prayer through the hospital chaplaincy's Facebook page. "But not all hospitalized patients are Catholic, and as a spiritual assistant Don Paolo attends to them all. He occasionally summoned the Imam for Muslim patients or connected them with their faith community. Or he prays with them, clarifying that "everyone prays in their own way, according to their beliefs, as they wish". "I don't have to make converts - he claimed -. In the ward I want to bring comfort, joy, hope. They don't care that I am a Catholic priest; all they want is for me to be there for them". **Father Paolo expressed a twofold wish for Christmas.** First of all, that patients who will have to spend Christmas in a hospital bed will live it as serenely as possible: "We will offer our deepest affection and closeness to ensure that it is so," he said. "I try to keep up a positive mood in the wards, I tell jokes. It may seem out of place but I want to transmit happiness to the patients and the medical staff. Occasionally some patients don't want to wear a ventilation helmet. A few days ago I was summoned to the pneumology ward: 'Father, he is very frightened, please come here, you know how to comfort everyone'. He asked me to hold his hand. Last night, at 2:30 a.m. a patient was afraid of being intubated and he asked me to stay with him until then. Patients don't need to be pitied. They need to know that they are not alone." His thoughts also go to healthcare workers: "I hope they will once again receive public support and recognition, and

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that once the pressure subsides, people won't forget everything they have done and are continuing to do."

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