

HELPING THE SICK AND THE DYING

Gratefully acknowledging the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops' pastoral effort to assist parishes, ministers, and families in their efforts to work with the sick and dying.

OUR TRADITION

Jesus is the Son of God and became one of us to save us. He is like us in all things but sin; he knows and understands our weakness, sickness and pain. Jesus is our brother in the flesh. During his life on earth, he taught us by his word and example that we are to care with love for the sick and the suffering. This is one important way we can keep his commandment to love others as he did.

The Church, the people of God, has recognized through the centuries, their responsibility to love and help the sick. Religious communities were founded and supported to care for the sick and the dying. Hospitals were built and maintained to look after people in need of such loving care. As well as giving physical care, the Church, as the body of Christ, celebrates prayers, blessings and sacraments for the comfort and even healing of the sick.

The Second Vatican Council, over 50 years ago, brought about a renewal in spiritual care for the sick and the dying:

- *The sick* can feel lonely, useless and cut off from the world and the Church. We are encouraged to pray for them, visit them, pray with them and help them by other acts of love. Holy Communion may be brought to them often.
- *The seriously sick* may receive the Anointing of the Sick as well as sharing in Communion and in prayer. Communion can be brought to them frequently, even daily.
- *The dying* can receive the Church's special sacrament for the dying – called viaticum: Anointing and Communion. Special prayers, visits, and blessings are also provided, as for the sick.

Concern for the sick and the dying is the responsibility of both the parish community and ALL its members; especially those closest to the ones in need.

THE SICK

Pastoral care of those who are sick is the responsibility of the parish community and of ALL its members.

Parish Care

- *Visits* by priests, deacons, pastoral workers and other ministers should be a normal activity of a parish community. The minister will read the Scriptures and pray with the person and may lay hands on the head of the sick person during the prayer. The minister may share parish news and see about the sick person's needs. The minister may bring Communion often, even daily, if the sick person wishes.
- *Awareness* of a parishioner's duty to the sick is an important task in any parish.

The parish helps its members to remain aware that they are all to be ministers to Christ's sick brothers and sisters. By remembering them in the prayer of the faithful at Sunday (and daily) Eucharist and by encouraging parishioners to visit them, the parish continues to serve the sick. Some parishes send Ministers of Communion to the sick as an extension of Sunday Mass.

Parishioners can help the sick in many ways:

- *Visiting.* A short visit, every day or frequently. Bring cheerful news.
- *Prayer.* Pray for the sick person each day. During your visit, offer to pray with them.
- *Scriptures.* Offer to read the Sunday gospel or a psalm or another passage from God's word.
- *Silence.* A visit does not have to be filled with sound. A silent time is helpful for everyone.
- *Touch.* Before leaving, hold the person's hand or place a hand on their head as blessing
- *Offer to help.* Helping by shopping, cleaning, doing errands or other forms of service may be needed or welcomed.

THE SERIOUSLY SICK/ILL

The Church offers the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick to those who are seriously ill, feeble because of old age, preparing for or recovering from an operation, or who suffer from some other physical or other condition that ails the person seriously.

Anointing of the Sick was developed from the practice of the apostles (Gospel of Mark 6.13) and of the early Church (Letter of James 5.14-15). This sacrament has been renewed in recent years.

- *Call the priest.* Whenever a believer becomes seriously sick/ill. The more conscious and alert the person is, the more fully they can take part in the celebration and be comforted.
- *Scripture.* The Church – represented by the priest, the sick person and the gathered relatives and friends – listens to the word of God and prays in faith for the patient.
- *Laying on of hands.* In silent prayer, the priest lays hands on the sick person's head.
- *Anointing with oil.* The priest rubs blessed oil on the person's forehead and hands, saying a brief prayer.
- *Other sacraments.* The sick person may wish to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation. After the anointing, Communion may be received. (No eucharistic fast is required of the sick person.)

Who can be anointed?

Those who are seriously sick/ill; patients before and after serious surgery; elderly people who are very weak; those who have some form of other serious physical or mental illness and who would be strengthened by the sacrament may be anointed; and sick children old enough to understand and be comforted by the sacrament. Pastoral discretion by the priest is essential in caring appropriately for the sick person and their circumstances.

The sacrament of Anointing of the Sick is for the living.

The priest does not anoint a dead body, but prays for the one who has died.

FOR THE DYING

The sacrament for the dying is the Eucharist, given as *viaticum* – food for the journey into eternal life.

Celebration

If possible, *viaticum* is given under both forms and is preferable celebrated during Mass. The usual instructions about fasting do not apply when someone is dying.

Otherwise, the priest or minister brings Communion. After hearing the word of God, the sick person is invited to make their baptismal profession of faith once again. All present share the sign of peace. Communion is given to the dying person as *viaticum* and then to others who are present. A blessing concludes this celebration.

Sudden Danger of Death

When a person suddenly comes into danger of death (accident, heart attack et al), there is a continuous rite celebrated by a priest: sacrament of Reconciliation, apostolic pardon, baptismal profession of faith, Anointing, *viaticum*, and blessing.

Continuing Care

The Church encourages continuing care of the dying; Communion may be brought each day as *viaticum*. Family members and friends are invited to visit, to pray with the dying person, to speak, to listen. Often it is appropriate to thank the dying person for what they have meant and done for others over the years.

Our Lord has promised to be with us always. Through our prayers and visits he reaches out to touch the dying person in a special way.

Commendation

As death draws near or after death occurs, the priest (or other) minister offers prayers for the one who has died.

IMPORTANT NOTES

Call your Parish

When someone in your family or a friend is seriously sick or in hospital or at home for a period of time, call your parish. Discuss the situation and ask for a priest or minister to visit, to pray with the sick person and to arrange for Communion and the other sacraments.

When a person is seriously ill or dying, **call at once** – don't wait until the person is unconscious or barely able to talk or respond.

Preparation

When a sick person is going to receive Communion, prepare a suitable place nearby, with a clean cloth, a lighted candle and a cross (if possible), and a glass of water and a spoon (if the sick person requires these to receive Communion easily). Greet the priest or minister at the door and bring them to the sick person's room.

Continuing Care

Jesus continues to bring his loving care to the sick through us: as we visit them, pray with them, touch them and help them, our Lord is reaching out to them in love.

Loving Father,
have mercy on the sick and the dying.
Help them understand and accept their daily suffering and pain
along with that of Jesus, our Lord;
and make us ever more gentle and kind toward all who suffer.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

*As the Lord says: "... when I was sick, you took care of me ... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me".
(Gospel of Matthew 25. 36, 40)*