

"HAVE YOU SEEN JOE & MARY LATELY?"

THE ROLE OF THE PARISH IN CARING FOR THE DYING.



*Seventh of an
8 Part Series*

Pope John XXIII referred often to the parish as the "village fountain". The phrase captures both the spiritual and the practical significance of parish life.

- A parish is the eucharistic source of "living water" in the neighborhood and countryside.
- A parish is also where a community gathers, much like villagers meeting at the well in the center of town.

A parish is not a collection of individuals, it is "a Eucharistic community", in the words of Pope John Paul II. In a culture that exalts independence, we are called through the parish to interdependence.

If "fellow villagers" haven't come to your "village fountain" the last few weeks, will they be missed? Will someone care enough to ask, "Have you seen Joe and Mary lately?" Will you or other parishioners take the time to find out what's going on, and arrange help for Joe and Mary if any is needed?

Today, the need for help will arise more often than not from a person's sickness, disability, or prolonged dying.

The "aging boom" and spiritual needs

Medicine has developed more numerous and sophisticated ways to ward off death. More people are living longer as a result.

The percentage of the population over the age of 65 will continue to grow as the "baby boom" generation ages. Thus, as observed by the Institute of Medicine in a 1997 report, questions about life-prolonging treatment become central issues for patients, families and clinicians. In the process, the tasks of preparing for death and caring well for those who are dying can be neglected, and opportunities for spiritual growth or completion of important relationships can be missed.

Health care workers admit that medicine is ill equipped to address spiritual needs. Technology is no substitute for spiritual guidance and comfort, especially when facing one's own approaching death.

According to a landmark national Gallup survey recently conducted on spirituality and dying, a majority indicated that, when death approaches, they would desire:

- to have someone with whom they can share their fears or concerns, to hold their hand;
- to have someone praying with them, to help them become spiritually at peace.

Other national data led the researchers to observe that "Old people getting sick need to count on the faith community to which they have belonged. Too often they cannot do this."

The researchers concluded that the "overarching message that emerges from this study is that the American people want to reclaim and reassert the spiritual dimension in dying." Yet, "there are many gaps between what people want and what the realities are today."

The parish as "spiritual hospice"

So, we have even secular groups urging the churches to act. Can we meet the challenge?

The resources and potential in the Catholic parish are enormous. We have much to share – Sacrament, Scripture, prayer, worship, and a caring community. The parish can become the "spiritual hospice" that people desire.

Many parishes are already responding to the needs of the dying and their loved ones by establishing pastoral visitor and parish nursing programs. Is this the case in your parish?

Other forms of outreach, such as respite care, meal delivery, and bereavement support are vitally important and should be pursued.

Eighty percent of all people want to spend the last days of their lives in the comfort of their homes. Practical assistance from the parish can help make this a reality.

That's why the Massachusetts Catholic Conference and the four Catholic dioceses in the Commonwealth formed the *In Support of Life* initiative. The Catholic Church is committed to meeting the physical, social, emotional, and spiritual needs of those with life-threatening illnesses and their family and caregivers, especially through the parish.

Will you join us at the fountain? Can your parish assume the challenge? To succeed, we must all work together because the stakes are life itself.

This bulletin insert is provided by the Massachusetts Catholic Conference as part of its initiative In Support of Life. To learn more you can contact our office at 1-617-367-6060 or visit our website at www.macathconf.org.

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