

The Catholic Doctor is In: Praying with the Sick

Prayer, the seeking of union with God, is the most comforting and powerful experience for many people who are ill, especially those suffering with life-threatening diagnoses. This is true, even for those who have little faith. How could it not be, particularly at a time when people are most vulnerable and in need? After all, prayer draws us deeper into the life of God, into ultimate reality: the life, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Not only that, prayer helps us confront our own brief and fragile earthly existence and unite this with the reality of eternal life. Prayer, then, becomes the key that unlocks the mystery of suffering and death. The very first and most important step in praying with the sick is having a prayer life ourselves. The second is having the intention of accompanying them, of walking with them on their journey.

With this in mind, how are we to pray with those who are seriously ill? Many people are at a loss in this area. Too often, in my experience, I have found people standing uncomfortable around a seriously ill or dying loved one's bed not sure what to do or say. My first task, especially as a priest, is to teach them how to pray and how to reconcile. (Reconciliation, asking for forgiveness, saying we are sorry, and forgiving others is an essential exercise, particularly when helping those at the end of life). For healthcare workers it is important to pray, too, perhaps silently if the patient and/or family are not open to such action. Considering the vulnerable and dependent situation in which a sick person often finds herself, it is critical not to impose prayer on anyone, but only to propose it.

How shall we pray? If the sick person is dying, most families will want us to pray with their loved one and them, but ask first anyway. If she is not dying and able to interact, make the offer of prayer. Would you like to pray together? Try suggesting different types of prayer, such as the rosary, the Divine Mercy Chaplet and other devotions, even simply the Lord's Prayer. If the person does not know how to pray these devotions, ask her if she would like to learn.

Always have a prayer book ready to give the person (the Knights of Columbus' "prayer Time" is an excellent and inexpensive choice). Another option is to read sacred

Scripture together and to perhaps even discuss the passages read. Spontaneous prayer is another good option. Further, it is important to talk about the meaning of prayer, especially if the person is not acquainted with the practice. Talk about your own experiences of praying (hopefully you have something to talk about!) This is your witness.

In praying with the sick, we should never forget the importance of explaining redemptive suffering and how each of us can participate in the sufferings of Christ as a way to pray. Many Catholics are not familiar with this basic teaching. Perhaps you have heard the phrase, “offer it up!” This is the gist, but often the phrase has been used in a rather unfeeling way.

Every Christian is called to be in communion with the suffering Christ. Therefore, every Christian can turn every suffering, no matter how large or small, into a prayer, an offering, for particular or general intentions. For example, let’s say I have a terrible stomachache. My prayer might go something like this: “Lord, I offer this stomachache for the people who are hungry in the world” (or for any intention in which you would normally pray).

It is important to teach this to those who are sick. I often pray with the sick person a prayer that helps them make a daily offering of their pain and suffering to the Lord for an intention. I keep it very simple, something they can easily remember. I also tell the sick person how important these kinds of prayers are for those in need and the significance of their being able to participate in the Passion of Christ.

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