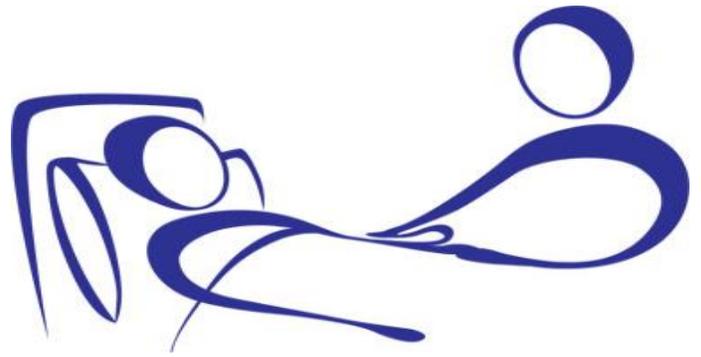


Pastoral Care



Sacred Heart and St. Matthew

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Are visits to the sick something only a priest should do?

No. There is much that any Christian can do for the sick, dying, or recently deceased. To visit and pray over others is a responsibility that we all share in Christ. The unique role that requires a priest is the celebration of the Anointing of the Sick – it is a special Sacrament only celebrated by Catholics. However, with or without the Sacrament, the church's ritual for the "Pastoral Care of the Sick" presumes that the *whole parish* is involved in the ministry to the ill. When you visit a sick friend or relative, you do so as Jesus' disciple. If you take communion to the homebound or hospitalized, you are acting in the church's name. Doctors and nurses live out their baptismal vocation by tending to our physical and psychological needs. Priests celebrate the "Sacrament of the Sick" with you, whenever possible. All these individual activities form our whole ministry to the sick. St. Matthew taught us that when we visit the sick we visit Christ himself. "Whatsoever you do to the least, you do to me." My hope is that the visits you receive from family and friends, Eucharistic Ministers, doctors and nurses, pastor and chaplains are a reminder that Christ himself cares for you when you are in the hospital, homebound or in a nursing home.

New privacy and confidentiality laws and hospitals' various approaches to them have made complex what was once a very simple procedure for pastors visiting the sick. Basically, I think these protective laws and procedures are good. Not everyone wants to be visited when they're hospitalized. Some need to reserve every ounce of energy for their recuperation. Some are embarrassed to find out they were mentioned by name in the general intercessions and that the whole town has found out they were in the hospital for what they considered a minor procedure.

What if I want a priest to see me when I'm homebound or hospitalized?

You may always request a priest to visit you in the hospital (or at least someone from the church). So what procedure works best to arrange a pastoral visit? Please call the parish or have an immediate family member do so for you. In cases of emergency, my cell number is provided in my office's voicemail message. If possible, it is best if I have between 12 and 36 hours warning, because I am not always able to drop everything for an urgent hospital visit. Either way, direct parish contact works better than relying upon the hospital to notify me or for me to remember the various unique procedures different hospitals have for releasing patient information.

The Madison and Milwaukee hospitals have chaplaincy staffs to tend to your spiritual needs, but sometimes they unintentionally overlook you. If you experience that, call the parish and I'll look into the matter with their pastoral care department. Also, I encourage you to receive the "Sacrament of the Sick" whenever you are seriously ill or about to have serious surgery. If possible, call to receive this sacrament the week-or-so before going to the hospital. The "Sacrament of the Sick" need not be a "last rite", so receive the sacrament when you find out you are seriously injured or ill. Do not delay - it is a wonderful source of healing and comfort. You are able to receive it as many times as you need to (throughout a lengthy illness).

"I was
sick and
you visited
me..."
—Matthew 25:36 NKJV

What is to be done for the actively dying or recently deceased?

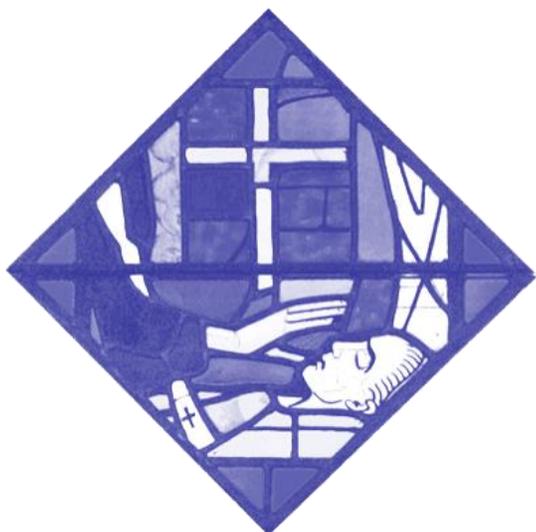
In some cases, the care of the sick naturally leads to the pastoral care of the dying. The church has distinct rituals for each. For example, the sick and dying are anointed; the dying receive viaticum (last communion) and final prayers.

Viaticum is a beautiful ritual in which the dying person reaffirms his or her baptismal faith. The ritual is filled with gentle reminders about the Eucharistic Lord being food for the journey to eternal life. There's no scary descriptive language about the hereafter whatsoever. The ritual may be repeated, so do not delay until the last possible moment in requesting this "food for the journey" from a priest or communion minister.

When the moment of death is near, there's a ritual which anyone (eg. a family member, friend, doctor, nurse, chaplain, priest, deacon or communion minister) may pray. It's called the "commendation of the dying". Read a short passage from scripture about eternal life. Recite the "Litany of Saints" replacing "pray for us" with "pray for him/her" and say this beautiful prayer:

"Go forth, Christian soul, from this world in the name of God the almighty Father, who created you, in the name of Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, who suffered for you, in the name of the Holy Spirit, who was poured out upon you, go forth, faithful Christian. May you live in peace this day, may your home be with God in Zion, with Mary, the virgin Mother of God, with Joseph, and all the angels and saints."

After the prayer, quietly have all present trace the cross on the person's forehead.



Once someone has died, there is *another* set of prayers that anyone (eg. family member, friend, doctor, nurse, chaplain, priest or deacon) may pray. These "Prayers after Death" include one for the deceased and one for the family.

For the deceased:

"Loving and merciful God, we entrust our brother/sister to your mercy. You loved him/her greatly in this life: now that he/she is freed from all its cares, give him/her happiness and peace for ever. The old order has passed away: welcome him/her now into paradise where there will be no more sorrow, no more weeping or pain, but only peace and joy with Jesus, your Son, and the Holy Spirit for ever and ever."

And for the family:

God of all consolation, in your unending love and mercy for us you turn the darkness of death into the dawn of new life. Show compassion to your people in their sorrow. Be our refuge and our strength to lift us from the darkness of this grief to the peace and light of your presence. Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, by dying for us, conquered death and by rising again, restored life. May we then go forward eagerly to meet him, and after our life on earth be reunited with our brothers and sisters where every tear will be wiped away. We ask this through Christ our Lord."

All trace the cross on the deceased's forehead. Life has come full circle. We are first welcomed into the church at the beginning of the baptismal ritual with the sign of the cross placed on our foreheads and we part bearing the same cross.

For these last two rituals especially, it's very important to focus not on *who* says the prayers but on *saying* them. Death is unscheduled and so in these days of the priest shortage you may not always be able to find a priest in time. Nevertheless, they will bring great comfort if someone prays them with you. Keep them handy. I've found they never scare the dying. In fact, they often bring them great comfort. Finally someone is admitting aloud what they themselves know is happening.

Please discuss this topic with your families, especially, unchurched family members. So often they are at a loss for what to do. Many people think that these prayers aren't valid if someone other than a priest says them. Even more dangerous than that, they may believe that someone near death, or already dead, must be anointed by a priest to receive eternal life. This is not what the Church teaches. For their comfort, let them know how we care for the sick and the dying, and that all the above prayers are meant to help us and guide us on the way toward eternal life through Jesus Christ.