

Catholic Caregivers

'Caregiving is pro-life!'

Not My Loved One

This is different. Of course your parent, your spouse, your loved one is getting older. Everybody is getting older. Everybody dies.

But this isn't "everybody." This is *your* parent, *your* spouse, or *your* loved one.

You're not the only one feeling this way. The realization that *my* husband or *my* wife needs help isn't an intellectual exercise. It's a frightening and growing discovery that gnaws at the heart and begins with self-doubt. Soon after, guilt, panic, frustration and grief can fight for dominance.

In the case of aging parents, members of the baby-boomer generation, who crowded playgrounds and classrooms, work places and housing markets, are facing the undeniable fact that Mom and Dad are marking their seventieth, eightieth, or even ninetieth birthdays.

The realization that my husband or my wife needs help isn't an intellectual exercise. It's a frightening and growing discovery that gnaws at the heart.

And suddenly—it always seems suddenly—the people who cared and nurtured and taught and provided are the ones who need help. Suddenly Mom isn't as independent as she used to be. Suddenly Dad is letting slide tasks he's been handling faithfully for more than half a century.

If you're an adult child living near your aging parent, you probably blame yourself for not noticing the gradual deterioration. Maybe Mom had a small stroke and fell and stayed on the kitchen floor all night until a neighbor happened to stop by. Why hadn't you dropped in more often? Why did it take something big?

If you live in another part of the country, a visit back to Dad—a visit you've put off for how long?—can be shocking. The small and not-so-small changes and problems have added up, and the spunky, independent person you remember is no longer there.

Why didn't you come sooner? Why didn't you notice the difference when the two of you spoke by phone? Why wasn't it obvious his letters were more

muddled and arrived less frequently? Why did you take that job so far away?

No wonder you start to feel panicky. You need to solve these problems now!

But you can't. In fact, you shouldn't try.

--First, you can't solve *all* the problems *now*. Most likely -- except in the case of a catastrophic event -- your loved one didn't reach this condition overnight and it will take time to make changes. There are no quick fixes.

--Second, *you*—singular—shouldn't solve the problems. If you swoop in and begin giving orders, you may be not so pleasantly surprised to see that the proud, self-reliant (some might say stubborn and cantankerous) person you thought gone is not gone entirely. Not by a long shot.

The more your spouse, your parent, your loved one is involved in finding solutions to the problems, the more cooperative he or she will be. More cooperation, less resistance.

And then there's the frustration. Why does it take a dozen phone calls to find the right agency to deliver the service your spouse needs? Why do you always feel as if you're either not doing enough or you're doing too much?

If you're caring for an aging parent, why don't you have the energy or time or money to properly take care of your spouse, your kids, *and* your parent?

In the dead of night, grief wins. There's the icy realization that your parent, your spouse, your loved one is going to die. As you try to cope and solve and assist, you can't help feeling this is the beginning of the end. You can't help the grief you feel because you know someday he or she will be gone.

You lie there and pray, "Please, God, not yet."

"Not *my* parent." "Not *my* spouse." "Not *him*."
"Not *her*." □

You and your loved one are being prayed for
by members of the Friends of St. John the Caregiver
(www.FSJC.org).

For a free copy of "The Little Book of Caregiver Prayers," send a self-addressed stamped envelope to: FSJC, P.O. Box 320, Mountlake Terrace, WA 98043.