

Catholic Caregivers

'Caregiving is pro-life!'

The Role of Spirituality in a Caregiver's Life

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

— John 19:26–27

One of the last things a caregiver wants or needs is pious platitudes about the spirituality of caregiving. Those saccharine, greeting-card sentiments with a religious spin often fall flat. Some of the "spiritual" things that get said to caregivers make matters worse.

Let's be honest: there are times in our lives when our spirituality is on the back burner at best. Spirituality—God, prayer, sacraments, and all the rest—may not make the top-ten list of our concerns when we're caught up in life's many demands. But there is some good news.

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If you haven't been too spiritual before now (or if it's been awhile), it's a small step for your "Oh dear God!" to be transformed from an exclamation muttered in fear and frustration to a quick prayer . . . muttered in fear and frustration. It's God's presence that not only lets you take that small step but also makes you aware you've done so.

How did that happen? Grace. Amazing grace.

A prayer that begins, "I know I haven't talked to you in a long time, and there are a lot of things I've done that I shouldn't have and a lot of things I didn't do that I should have . . ." is a very good prayer. So, too, one that begins, "I know I haven't believed in you in a long time . . ." or "I know I've been mad at you for a long time . . ."

What if your spiritual life is strong and active? When you find yourself in a caregiving role, you might feel as if you have to put your spiritual life on hold. You can't make it to weekday Mass. You can't attend the prayer group meeting. You can't head to the retreat house for your annual weekend away.

But you don't need to "go there" to experience God in a very particular and personal way. God has

come to you. Or, more accurately, God — present with your care receiver at this time in his or her life — has invited you to join him.

Now your spiritual life may consist of receiving Holy Communion from an extraordinary minister of the Eucharistic who has come to visit your loved one. Now it may be saying prayers and reading Scripture with your care-receiver — for the first time in a long time, if ever. Now God's presence may help you realize that a bedside, a car, or a doctor's office has replaced the retreat house this year.

Now you may realize that you and your loved one are on a pilgrimage. The bedroom, the car, the doctor's office — all are holy ground, because the two of you are making a truly sacred journey. Together, you're preparing for what is to come: one of you will continue into the next world, and one will remain behind. On that day, one will grieve, even as she knows her care-receiver is rejoicing. And one will rejoice, even as she knows that—for a time—her caregiver is grieving. This can be a once-in-a-lifetime experience: a walking with God that can never be duplicated or repeated.

These aren't pious platitudes meant to gloss over the realities of caregiving. You know the truth: Caregiving is exhausting. Caregiving is maddening. Caregiving is frightening. Caregiving is frustrating. But the truth is also that, in the middle of all that, you can experience an awareness of the presence of God.

Whether you feel it or not, God is constantly present with you in your new role. And whether you like it or not, you've been given an assignment, a mission, a vocation: you are a caregiver. ("Oh, God help me!" That's another good prayer.) This is God's will for both you and your loved one. He has prepared you for this all your life. By loving you, God and your care-receiver have taught you to love. And love is the essence of caregiving. □

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