

Catholic Caregivers

'Caregiving is pro-life!'

Your Care-receiver's Spiritual Health

It's not really possible for you to know your care-receiver's spiritual health. Ultimately, none of us knows the state of another person's soul. That's between the person and God.

Still, we can see indications of spiritual health, and we have ways to foster it. The Catholic Church exists to foster it! We can observe changes. If your dad always took a mile-long walk after dinner but now he doesn't, something could have changed physically. In the same way, if your wife never missed Sunday Mass but now her attendance is hit-or-miss, something may well have changed spiritually.

A good way to begin that "spiritual checkup" for your care-receiver is to look at these changes. Keep in mind that the reason for the change may or may not have a spiritual basis. For instance, there's a difference between your wife being unable to go to church because she no longer drives and her not *wanting* to go to church because she's angry at God after the death of a loved one.

On the other hand, as we age we may pay more attention to spiritual matters. Your mom may have moved from being lukewarm about spiritual matters to being intensely interested. This isn't uncommon. Unlike physical or mental health, spiritual health can reach its peak in old age. Even as a mind and body falter, a soul can continue to grow in grace.

Are you unsure about your loved one's spiritual health? As with other things, you can ask him about it: "Dad, would you like to go to Mass more often?" If he says yes, work at arranging that. (Perhaps you and your siblings can take turns driving him, or someone from the parish can provide a ride.) If he says no, this may be a good time to start a conversation about spirituality. Be willing to accept an answer of "None of your business!"

In general, does your care-receiver seem at peace with this time of her life, or is she frightened, bitter, angry, or confused? Does she ever express a desire to improve the spiritual part of her life?

Here's a list of some central issues to consider:

Access to Mass and the sacraments: If your parent can't go to Mass, does a Eucharistic minister bring him or her Holy Communion on a regular

basis? Does Mom have access to the other sacraments? Would she like Father to come to the house so she can go to confession and/or receive the anointing of the sick?

Parish involvement: Is Dad still involved in the parish to the extent that he's able? Does someone bring him the weekly bulletin? (It may be that you can download this from the parish's Web site.) Can he make it to a Knights of Columbus meeting or stay after Mass for a special pancake breakfast? Maybe he wants to be part of a prayer chain where parishioners pray for their fellow parishioners. Some seniors and others who are homebound find that this is a very satisfying way to continue to be a part of a parish.

Spiritual reading and media: Does your husband still get the diocesan newspaper and other religious periodicals he's enjoyed in the past? Would he like to have other books, such as a large-print prayer book or Bible? Would he like a daily devotional magazine (*My Daily Visitor*, for example) that focuses on the daily Mass readings or each day's feast? Would he enjoy listening to hymns on tape, CD or MP3 player? Would he like to listen to the local Catholic radio station or watch a Catholic television program?

Prayer: Would your wife like to find out more about a particular way of praying (charismatic prayer, for instance, or centering prayer)? Would she like to pray or read the Scriptures with you? Would she like to say the rosary? Does she have a rosary? Would she like to pray the stations of the cross? There are a number of versions of this traditional devotion, including some specifically for a person who is elderly, ill, or dying.

A final point: You can provide spiritual help to your care-receiver even if these things don't appeal to you personally, even if your practice of Catholicism is very different from your loved one's, even if you and your care-receiver are of different faiths, even if you want nothing to do with any religion. It's not hypocritical to see to it that your loved one receives the spiritual assistance that he or she is seeking, even if you don't see the need at all. At the very least, you're helping him or her find comfort and peace.

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