



## Pastoral Visits with Someone with Dementia

Dementia is an umbrella term that covers many different diagnoses with the common thread of memory loss. Memory loss leads to confusion, anxiety and potential isolation. A parishioner may show signs of dementia by coming to church on the wrong day or time, or behaving oddly at Mass. If they feel uncomfortable with people's reaction and their own confusion, they may stop coming

to Mass and parish activities. Now is the time to accelerate parish outreach to avoid losing the connection with these faithful parishioners who now have a greater need for full participation in the Sacraments and membership in the parish community.

Here are some tips from Lynn Ritter, Education Coordinator of the Northwest Ohio Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association, to help make pastoral visits with someone with dementia enjoyable for all.

- Always wear a smile.
- Keep communication conversational and not inquisitional, pausing often to allow time for processing.
- Keep conversation in the here and now.
- Don't confront or argue when faced with inaccuracies.
- Build a foundation of trust.
- Eliminate competing stimulation and distractions like television and background noises.
- Allay anxiety and fears if person is aware of their loss.
- Offer comfort and reassurance through touch.
- Keep visit brief if it is an obviously bad day.
- Share pictures of their church, pastoral staff, and parishioners from the current or past parish directories.
- Use the clarity of long term memory to talk about former pastors, deceased family, and the way things "used to be".
- Accept that spouses and children may become unrecognizable as dementia progresses and more and more memory is lost.
- Always address the person as an adult.
- If their ability to speak is lost, continue to talk.
- Always presume the person is able to hear and understand your words.
- Bring something to share, like food to eat together or a meaningful trinket.
- Recite familiar prayers and sing favorite hymns together.
- Talk a walk together.
- Keep good-byes brief. If the person becomes upset when you depart, try putting things associated with leaving (coat, car keys) in another room.

Recommended book to accompany your visits:

*Dying with Jesus: Meditation for Those Who are Terminally Ill, Their Families and Their Caregivers*, by Angela M. Hibbard, IHM ISBN 0-8146-2918-0

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