



Diocese of Leeds

Dementia and the Eucharist

Neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:39



It is important that priests, deacons or extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist feel comfortable when offering communion to a person with dementia. The progress of dementia has been described as 'a journey from the mind to the heart' and that means that people with dementia are often more sensitive to other people's anxiety than people who do not have dementia.

One way to increase your understanding is to **become a Dementia Friend**. Visit www.dementiafriends.org.uk or call 0300 222 1122 to learn more about what it is like to live with dementia and turn that understanding into action.

Holy Communion is a great blessing. What makes Communion the supreme gift is not the 'understanding' we accord it, but the fact that it is the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ. That reality is not in the slightest dependent on anyone's understanding of so great a mystery. Ministers should not be scared to get it wrong. It is our responsibility to take care of the Eucharist but that does not mean we should not use it. The Lord will not mind if we get it wrong. It is our intentions that count.

What is quite clear is that despite seeming to 'withdraw' into 'another place in their minds', many people living with dementia are still able to pray and their spiritual lives are still present. Hence **we must presume nothing about what the person can and cannot 'appreciate' spiritually.** For some people in the early stages of dementia, the normal service of Communion may be applicable because they will be familiar with it, but for those further on into the illness, a simplified version which demands no verbal response may be necessary.

Different approaches are needed depending on whether you are visiting someone at home or in a care home or hospital.

- If the person is **living at home** there is more opportunity to arrange how the visit might take place. We can ask the carer to help create an atmosphere for the visit; to prepare a table with a white cloth, crucifix and candle, maybe even an open bible, and perhaps have some sacred music playing softly. These small gestures help to tell the person with dementia that something special is about to happen and can act as a cue to the person's memory.
- **In a care home or hospital** there may be other people sitting nearby and the demands of the staff need to be taken into consideration. If it's possible, try to make sure the carers know what time you are coming. It is important to gain the respect and trust of staff members so greet everyone you meet warmly and ask permission to see the person, explaining you are from the church and are bringing Holy Communion. Try and find a private

space, so long as the person with dementia is willing and you have the permission of the staff. Flexibility and patience are essential. You may find the radio playing or the TV on. Ask permission to turn off or at least turn down the volume. Ask people sitting nearby if it's all right to pray with the person; you may find they join in some of the prayers. Use of symbols such as a cross, statue(s), rosary and candles all help to give clues and cues to what is happening. Remember to thank the staff before you leave.

Practical suggestions

- The practice of attending a parish Mass should be maintained as long as possible and be imaginative in taking all necessary action possible for this to happen e.g. attending the same Mass, sitting in the same area accompanied by a relative or a parishioner who knows the person and is sympathetic with the condition.
- If the above is no longer possible and home visits are necessary, try to get to know the individual with dementia e.g. areas of past interests, favourite hymns, prayers, devotions.

Dementia and the Eucharist

- Try and achieve consistency especially when visiting in the person's own home/residential home and ensure that the carer or residential staff know what day and time you will be calling.
- Build-up a relationship with those closest to the person with dementia.
- Communication is more than words but it can be very effective through a genuine smile, a friendly approach, active listening, and a gentle touch.
- Courteous and appropriate 'touching' is a very important means of communication with a person who has dementia as it reassures, comforts them and establishes a non-verbal contact with them.
- Tell them you have brought Our Lord for them today and show them the pyx.
- Ask him/her if they would like Holy Communion. If he/she says 'no' then do not impose but simply say a short prayer, give them a blessing and tell them when you will be visiting next.
- If the response is indistinct, which may be the case, proceed reverently and sensitively.
- To those living in a world that has become confusing and strange, the repetitive nature of ritual and well known prayers gives familiarity and reliability and will act as a cue to the person's memory. We have body memory and the sign of the cross can be a wonderful trigger.
- Other triggers mentioned earlier can be the use of symbols, such as a cross, a candle, an open Bible. Small gestures are 'reminders' that something special is about to happen and can 'trigger' the spiritual depths still alive within the person despite any other difficulties with speech, communication or apparent 'understanding'.
- Flexibility and patience will be essential.
- Face the individual at eye level when communicating, speak slowly and clearly.
- Give time for the individual to respond to prayers but also be prepared for unexpected
- Observe non-verbal aspects of communication to the readings/prayers you are using e.g. when praying the Our Father, Hail Mary etc.
- Observe the reaction of the person when given Communion by a lay person rather than a member of clergy wearing a collar.
- Get the person involved as much as possible e.g. saying a favourite prayer aloud.
- To give them Communion it is necessary to face the person directly, kneeling down at their level if possible, so that you are not 'looking down' on the person.
- Hold the host in front of them so that the person can clearly see who they are about to receive as you say the prayers clearly and slowly.
- Prayers need to be greatly simplified, as a 'response' from the person may not be forthcoming, depending on the stage of the condition.
- A simplified rite can include: the sign of the cross, a short simplified Gospel reading, slowly saying the Our Father and then telling the person that you are going to give them Jesus and give them the host, or part of it.
- If you think that it is likely that the person may spit out the host then withdraw the host, replace it in the pyx and place your hand gently on his/her arm saying something like: 'Jesus is always with you'.
- You may wish to finish the service with another familiar prayer and then the prayer of blessing.
- Keep as much eye contact as you can with the person, even during prayers. Praying with eyes shut can make people feel disconnected.

Never underestimate the power of Our Lord to bring comfort to people in any situation, or the value that frequent, reverent visits have for people with dementia and their families/carers.

'I may not always remember who you are, but I will always remember how you made me feel' www.ChristineBryden.com