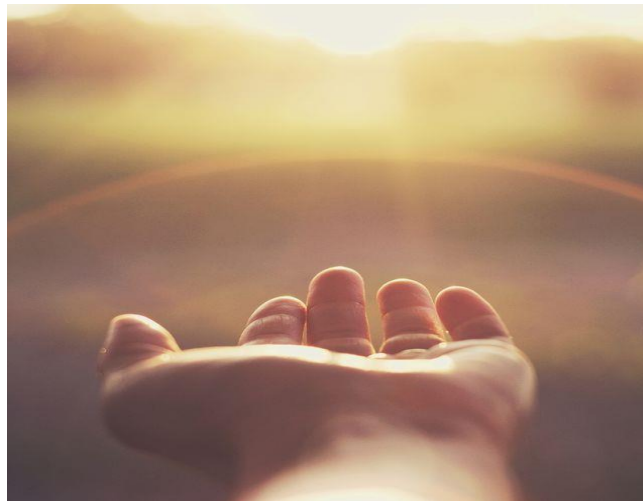


Dementia and the Sacraments of Healing

The Sacraments of Healing are the Sacrament of Reconciliation, also known as Penance or Confession, and the Anointing of the Sick.



'God the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' **Amen.**

The Latin word *sacramentum* means "a sign of the sacred". The seven sacraments are liturgical moments that point to the presence and sacred activity of God with and among his people. They provide special occasions or opportunities for experiencing God's loving and saving presence. They are both signs and instruments of God's grace.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation, otherwise referred to as Confession or the Sacrament of Penance, comprises three elements:

1. The confessing of one's sin.
2. A conversion or change of heart (originally termed a firm purpose of amendment).
3. A celebration of the newfound peace the sacrament gives.

It is a tangible sign of the healing power of God's unconditional forgiveness at work through this Sacrament, which brings great comfort as we come to terms with our own mortality.

This Sacrament does require an awareness of sin, an understanding of repentance, and the ability to articulate both the sins and the repentance according to the

Guidelines. This might make it quite impossible for people in advanced stages of dementia, but it is very possible early on in dementia.

If the person is at a stage in their dementia where they are struggling to remember their sins, they just need to tell the priest that they have been diagnosed with dementia, that that they can't remember any specific sins but that, if there's anything they have done to offend the Lord, they are sorry. The priest can give them absolution for any and all sins.

If a person with dementia is struggling to remember what penance the priest has given, they should not worry. Just suggest they say an Our Father and a Hail Mary. God knows the sincere contrition that is in our hearts.

Important Note:

The dementia can cause a person to do some remarkably inappropriate things. Perfectly decent kind and saintly people will start hitting, spitting, swearing and stripping off. They are not wilful acts but they reflect acts of disordered minds and we may console ourselves and their families with the thought that they are done in the innocence of dementia.

Any person living with more advanced dementia who cannot make a Confession is not missing out on God's grace. The sacraments are channels of grace within the Church but God is not limited to the sacraments. Those who, through no fault of their own, cannot receive the sacraments, will receive God's grace in ways that are known only to Him.

The Sacrament of Anointing of the sick:

formerly known as The Last Rites or Extreme Unction, is a ritual of healing appropriate not only for physical but also for mental and spiritual sickness. It is no longer associated with near death and it can be received more than once during the same illness if the person's condition becomes more serious, or frailty becomes more pronounced. It offers the power of healing to those who are worn out with disease or age and experience it as a burden, by enabling them to discover the positive aspects of coming closer to our final meeting with the Lord himself, who loves us and is looking forward to meeting us face to face.

The priest prays over the person and anoints their forehead and the palms of their hands with holy oil. This ritual is a tangible sign of the Holy Spirit offering a special gift of healing and physical/spiritual strength.

In offering gentle, kind and nurturing support, we are offering healing to people with dementia. We also open up the possibility of healing for ourselves. **Prayer is a practical thing that we can do** and even in very advanced dementia people respond, joining in and doing other acts of devotion as a result of the prayer they are surrounded by. Remember that even when people are unable to respond they may well hear and understand what is happening. This has certainly been the message given by people who have been apparently unconscious and recovered.

Singing a hymn can also bring healing. The familiar hymn “Hail, Queen of Heav’n” asks Our Lady to take pity upon our sorrows, to calm fears, to sooth our suffering and to give us hope. We ask Our Lady very simply to pray for us; to pray for the wanderer; to pray for the person with dementia.

*Hail, Queen of heav'n, the ocean star,
Guide of the wand'rer here below;
Thrown on life's surge, we claim thy care:
Save us from peril and from woe.
Mother of Christ, O Star of the sea,
Pray for the wanderer, pray for me.*
John Lingard (1771-1851)

Sources: Catholic Medical Quarterly May 2009, Dr Adrian Treloar, “Welcoming Older People: ideas for and from parishes” from Growing Old Grace-fully

