

Keeping Vigil with the Dying

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Introduction

Over the years, trying events and harsh realities inevitably touch our lives. Some happen suddenly and without warning. Others unfold over a period of time, giving us the opportunity to ponder their significance and to prepare, in some measure, for what is to come.

You have heard that the death of someone dear to you seems imminent (likely to occur within a day or two). You may have expected this news. Still, the prospect of a friend or loved one's death, whether foreseen or not, can evoke an onrush of thoughts and

emotions, some surprising, some even perplexing.

Long-neglected memories may revisit, accompanied by a host of feelings from thankfulness to regret, lightheartedness to anger. Faith responses may waver, now finding comfort in God's presence, now questioning God's wisdom or sense of timing. Focus may blur, drifting quickly from regard for the person dying to concern for one's own vulnerability. All of these are normal, human reactions to an encounter with a mystery that touches us deeply but ordinarily gets little attention in our day-to-day lives.

So now, faced with the fact of this impending death, you have the opportunity and privilege to spend some time

“keeping vigil,” watching and waiting for the Lord to come and call your loved one home.

You may have participated in such an effort in the past. Or perhaps this is a new experience for you. In either case, this booklet may help you give a richer meaning to the sacred work before you.

In the following pages you will find some reminders and practical suggestions for orienting yourself to the responsibility you are assuming. You will also find prayers to be said for your loved one and prayers meant solely for you. Finally, you will see brief and longer Scripture passages that speak words of comfort and nourish faith in the Light that shines through the darkness.

May your intimate sharing of pres-

ence during this vigil be a profound blessing for you and the one with whom you wait. May it speak eloquently of life and love and draw you both more deeply into the saving mystery of the Lord's death and resurrection.

A Few Suggestions

As you begin your time of vigil, you may find it helpful to keep the following in mind:

- If you are in a nursing facility, check with staff before attempting to offer your loved one any physical assistance. Giving the individual a glass of water or repositioning him may cause distress rather than provide comfort. Swabbing the forehead with a cool washcloth or moistening the lips will probably be acceptable and helpful. In a home setting defer to the experience and wishes of family caregivers.

- Expect to see changes in the person's breathing pattern or skin color. In a healthcare setting, inform nursing staff of notable or dramatic physical changes when they occur.
- Remember that this person has a history. Think of ways to tap into that history. Recount the blessings and accomplishments of her past. Play music, say prayers, and read poems or inspirational pieces that she has particularly liked. Such familiar sharings can be especially soothing and reassuring.

- As a rule, do not say anything in your loved one's presence that you would not wish him to hear. Hearing is said to be the last sense to fail. It is more appropriate to talk to the individual than about him.
- When you speak, offer gentle words of peace. Reminisce with a spirit of thankfulness. Speak words of reconciliation, if appropriate, and color your conversation with love.
- Speak of a merciful and compassionate God who wants only to love us and give us true joy. Speak of a God who longs for our trust and whose loving arms wait for our surrender. But do not speak all the time.

- Value and respect the grace of silence. There is a detachment that is occurring in the dying process that is often best supported by long periods of quiet.
- Family ties and a sense of responsibility can remain strong even on one's deathbed. If death becomes a long and agonizing struggle, the dying individual may need to be given "permission" to die by the significant people in her life.