

Think you'll need last rites? Better plan ahead

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April 11, 2011

CLEVELAND (RNS) In days long gone, Roman Catholic priests regularly made deathbed house calls, even in the middle of the night with little notice, to pray over the dying and anoint them with holy oils.

The candlelight ritual, popularly known as last rites, continues in hospitals, nursing homes, hospice houses and private homes. But it happens less frequently because priests -- the only ones who can perform the service -- are in short supply.

Although fewer Catholics are seeking what's officially known as the sacrament of anointing of the sick, those who do want it could be at risk of reaching their final hours without the prayer-whispering presence of a Roman-collared priest unless they plan ahead.

"We recommend that whenever you're ill, ask for that sacrament," said retired Cleveland Bishop Anthony Pilla. "So many times people don't want to be anointed because they think that might mean they're going to die.

"But it's not just a sacrament for the dying," he said. "It's for the sick and the recovering."

Pilla said he even recommends the sacrament to expectant mothers, people facing surgery and the elderly. "Ask for the sacrament and trust in God's healing graces," he said.

Frank Fedor, 88, a cancer patient at Hospice House in Cleveland, recently received last rites.

"It's a sacrament that's very important to our Catholic faith," said his daughter, Cheryl Kimmel. "It gives our family a sense of peace."

But for many Catholics today, last rites is an afterthought. In the old days, it was common for a Catholic family to own a last rites kit, which included a crucifix, candles and holy oils.

"It's not such an intense practice as it was," said Pilla, adding, "Institutional religion isn't as valued as it was in other times."

Despite the priest shortage, many hospitals are staffed with at least one full-time priest making daily rounds and a priest on call at night. Hospice organizations also have priests on call.

In many places around the country, "Hospitals have established good links with local parishes," said David Lichter, director of the National Association of Catholic Chaplains, based in Milwaukee.

Lichter said Catholics living in urban areas who want the sacrament have an easier time finding priests. In rural areas, he said, it can be more difficult.

The Rev. Bob McGeeney, a Lutheran minister who heads the chaplain program at Cleveland's St. Vincent Charity Hospital, said the hospital staff asks people who are being admitted whether they want to see a priest.

"A lot of people say, 'Oh, yeah. I didn't think of that.'"

McGeeney said St. Vincent has two priests who are either at the hospital or on call around the clock.

"With the priest shortage, the diocese is trying very hard," he said. "They don't always succeed. But I know they're trying."

The Rev. Brian Bagley-Bonner, a United Church of Christ minister who coordinates spiritual care for the Hospice of the Western Reserve, recalled an incident a few years ago when he urgently needed a Catholic priest for a dying patient in a nursing home.

It was on a weekend when priests throughout the diocese were out of town on a retreat. After calling multiple parishes with no luck, Bagley-Bonner called the diocese's Center for Pastoral Leadership at Borromeo Seminary.

"The center called back within an hour and said, 'Bishop Pilla will be out to anoint the patient.'

"The nursing home staff was all atwitter, saying, 'We've got to clean up. The bishop is coming.' And the family was so pleased that someone of his stature was giving the sacrament."

Bagley-Bonner acknowledged there are times when a patient wanting a priest slips away before one can be found.

"It certainly can be a challenge," he said. "Sometimes it becomes a couple-days process. People need to be aware that the anointing of the sick can be done anytime.

"Try to anticipate. Look at your last days instead of your last hour."

The Rev. Harry Werner, a Lutheran minister who has been the director of pastoral care at University Hospitals for 30 years, added:

"They're now more generous with giving the last rites. There's a change in thinking. It's not like in the Bing Crosby movies where you waited until the last minute."