

Reflections

1. To die alone or to grieve alone is a tragedy for any person and for all mankind.

Every human being is our brother or sister. Mother Teresa of Calcutta once remarked in response to an individual who wondered how she could pick up a hideous, filthy leper lying in the gutter, "I really believe I am picking up the body of Christ."

We also have a special relationship and thus responsibility for each Christian in the world, since every follower of Jesus shares with us a common bond of faith and grace.

Finally, as Catholics we form a mystical body, a spiritual family, a holy people of God. We welcome a child into our midst with love and warmth at baptism; we should send that same person off on his or her journey to heaven surrounded by a similar love and warmth at death.

The empty, aching, grieving individual likewise should not have to bear his or her burden alone.

2. When persons remove the barrier of denial about death, the path opens for acceptance and peace to enter their hearts. But some never are able to go beyond denial. We must understand and accept that fact, then with love continue to care for them and their families.

3. To have a simple, but certain grasp of the stages in dying — denial, anger, bargaining, sadness, acceptance, isolation and desolation — and to know how to respond to each in an appropriate, uncomplicated manner will prove invaluable in our ministry to the seriously ill and those who care for and about them.

4. The very ill or the very old are often isolated or desolate. Our presence through sensitive touch and our interest through reflective listening will do wonders to comfort, heal and support these hurting people.

5. God's word in the scriptures is wisdom and power. Those inspired texts have a unique ability to supply the mind with understanding and the heart with courage. Why is this happening to me? How can I bear this cross? are questions often answered by reflecting upon the biblical message. When we feel at a loss for the right words, it is reassuring to remember the invisible, mysterious workings of grace through the scriptural texts we read with or to the sick.

6. The immediate hours after death are confused, stunned, busy and difficult moments for the bereaved. But once calls are made, arrangements completed and people greeted, there often is a long, vacant period prior to the first calling hours. Reading through the funeral texts, selecting the appropriate passages and deciding on other elements of the liturgy during this time not only means a more personal celebration in church, it also fills a void and helps the grieving understand better the mystery of death and life.

7. There are many people giving support and comfort at the time of the death and funeral. But in the months which follow the bereaved carry the grief alone. Priests, deacons, religious and lay persons on the parish staff normally do not have the time to visit on a regular basis. They are busy with others who have died or are burying their beloved. If a parish is to call upon these alone and grieving people, allowing them to talk and to weep, it must be done by a corps of volunteers. Are you willing? How would you organize this program?