When a loved one is nearing the end of his/her life we often feel helpless. We want to do something. We’re a bit like Mary at the foot of the cross. All she could do was wait and “be with”. One thing many of us “of a certain age” were schooled to do was to make sure the dying person had “his last rites”. It was something we could DO.

In the last fifty plus years the Church has gone deep into its centuries-old liturgical treasury and issued rituals based on historical study combined with the best of newer religious anthropology. One of those rituals is the **Pastoral Care of the Sick.** This ritual has been with us for almost fifty years now. In recovering the long tradition of the Church (1500 years vs 150 years) some things changed to make our ministry consonant with the long tradition.

The official name of the sacrament which uses oil is the Anointing of the Sick. Ministry to the dying is something else. The Anointing is appropriate prior to serious surgery, at the initial diagnosis of a serious disease, or when a person is seriously debilitated by age even though there is not a specific diagnosis. In other words, DON’T WAIT TILL THE PERSON IS DYING.

Then what is the ministry of the Church to the dying? It consists of three things. First, the regular reception of Holy Communion. We are thankful to all those Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion who minister the sacrament to those in hospitals, care facilities, and the home-bound. Secondly, when death draws closer we celebrate Viaticum, a special ceremony that requires that the person be able to respond at least minimally. When the minister of Viaticum is a priest, he can also give the Apostolic Blessing which carries a plenary indulgence. Finally, there are the official prayers for the dying. ANYONE may lead those prayers.

I have sent the parish secretaries of the Region a leaflet of those prayers that I’ve been sharing with families for years. Often we just don’t know how to pray at those times. The Church provides us with prayers and litanies to help both the dying person and those who love her. IF YOU WOULD LIKE A COPY TO HAVE ON HAND IN YOUR HOME, CONTACT THE SECRETARY AT YOUR PARISH.