

Correspondence

The last rites in a time of pandemic

ABSTRACT

This correspondence argues that it is not only rituals after the death of a loved one that are important for grieving and eventual healing but also rituals at the point of death, such as the Last Rites in the Catholic Church. Because of the raging pandemic, however, the Last Rites have been done virtually for a number of Covid 19 patients. Cybertechnologies have provided an alternative space for the Last Rites to enable the dying, the family, and friends, to experience the gracious presence of God, the support of the Christian community, and to find meaning in their suffering.

Keywords beliefs, health promotion, mortality

Rituals are important in allowing people to grieve the loss of a loved one. However, the conduct of such rituals during this pandemic has been restricted due to the limitations in face-to-face gatherings, avoidance of close contact and lockdowns.¹ The lack of rituals, including ritual for the dying, can indeed make it difficult for people to acknowledge the loss, thus leading to complicated grief.

For Catholics, among the rituals that help both the dying and their loved ones are the Last Rites. The Last Rites are a group of sacraments administered to the patient, normally in the presence of the family. It consists of the sacrament of penance, the anointing of the sick (a sacrament of healing for those who are seriously ill but not necessarily at the point of death), and the reception of the Holy Communion or the viaticum (a food for the journey home). The Last Rites prepare not only the person for a peaceful death, but also the family and friends to let go by accepting that the people we love belong not to us, but ultimately to God.

Because of the novel coronavirus' high rate of transmissibility, many patients die alone, without ever having any contact with their loved ones in these last, and possibly terrifying moments. It is not only the dying that suffers from this isolation but the family and friends too who are deprived of the opportunity to say the last goodbye or give a parting hug to their loved one.

Beneficial to both the living and the dying, the Last Rites have been adapted by the Church to the current pandemic

in various ways. Healthy priests under age 60 travel around hospitals and nursing homes to provide the sacrament for Covid19 patients. They don masks and gowns and say the prayers from a distance. For the anointing of oil, instead of using their thumbs to anoint the forehead with oil, they anoint the feet with Q-tips.² Others rule out the Last Rites for patients with Covid19 but nevertheless reach out to the family through phone or video chat. Officially, there are no sacraments online in the Catholic Church; neither the nurse nor another person can do the actual anointing. There is however no prohibition for friends, family, and health care workers to pray over the patient and lay hands on them using oil.

Fr. Dan Cancino, MI, a priest and medical doctor was contacted by the sister of his dying friend to anoint him online. Together with the family of his friend, they set up a video call with the assistance of the nurse clad in full-body personal protective equipment (PPE) at the side of his friend.³

Through a youtube video, Fr. J Michael Sparough, SJ, lays his hands on the sick and allows the patient to anoint himself/herself. Referring to the story of Jesus' healing of the centurion servant, he notes how Jesus did not need to be physically present to heal; his words suffice (Matthew 8:5–13).⁴

For the dying, the family, and friends, it may not matter whether the ritual is considered by the Church a sacrament

or not. It is an occasion for them to feel the gracious presence of God and the care of the Christian community,⁵ and find meaning in their suffering, which is a first step toward healing.

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