

Trying to Get the Loose Ends Tied Up

I have kept an eye on the road in front of the house this particular morning and when the mail truck comes I call to the dog and we lope to the box — the only exercise we will get this wintry, blowing day.

Delight of delights. There is a letter from my sister Thomasina. We correspond erratically — when some event or past memory strikes a chord.

The envelope is bulky and I envision a long letter from her with perhaps an inclusion of a note or maybe a drawing from Sam, her seven-year-old.

Instead, when I open it, a folded Valentine falls out plus a few lines on yellow stationery from my sister.

The Valentine is one she received the week before. She would like it back, she says, but she wants me to read it.

It is from a girl we know. Actually, she is a girl no longer. In her mid-thirties, I think. We have not seen her in perhaps 20 years. Thomasina, hearing that she

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All in the Family

is seriously ill, has obtained her address and written to her, telling her about her husband and children.

The answer on the pink Valentine is poignant and sad.

The girl is happy for my sister. She always wanted children she writes. But, "I was not allowed to date as a teenager and after my mother died there was my younger brother to care for. After my father died, there was just the two of us holding on together."

"Yes," she writes in response to my sister's carefully worded inquiry. She is sick. She has cancer. She lists three sites on her body which have been invaded.

She is, she adds, trying to put her affairs in order. An old-fashioned term. But an apt one. Her youngest brother in his early twenties is very worried, she says. We know from other sources that the brother is unable to care for himself. Although she does not say it we know that the uppermost question in her mind is what will become of him. There is no one to take over. She says all this without self-pity or complaint. It is a matter-of-fact account.

The girl ends the letter mentioning me, wondering about my life. On the yellow stationery my sister suggests I write to her. Of course, I say, in a telephone call to my sister. Of course.

That was two weeks ago. Each day I mentally put down what I will say, how I will couch it. I cannot find the right words.

Compared to this girl I am wealthy beyond belief, blessed and graced with all the riches that count.

She has on the pink Valentine, via my sister, sent me a message, although she does not know it. It is one I think will stay with me for a long time. In vain I struggle to send one back.

Developing Family Spirituality

Every night after supper during Lent when I was a child, we knelt together to say the rosary as a family. And almost every night, before we were through, one of the seven of us was sent from the room for distracting others.

Finally, to deal with the situation, my parents decided we would kneel back to back. So like the early Westerners with their wagons, we put our chairs in a circle, backs inward, and prayed. So much for shared prayer.

Memories like this keep many families from enjoying prayer together, particularly if it's a blend of young children, teens, and parents. They are boxed into the rosary style of prayer, a type that is becoming decreasingly popular in today's families. The rosary is essentially a private, not a communal, prayer. As such, it's invaluable when you're alone on a bus or can't sleep. But as a means of stimulating family spirituality, it's low on the list.

There are two forms of prayer experiencing a popular renewal in families today, scriptural prayer and meditation. Why not give them a try in your family during Lent and see if they have any staying power?

Scriptural prayer: this is especially effective in families with interfaith marriages and/or reluctant

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Talks With Parents

teens. The Protestant spouse usually feels quite comfortable with the Bible and can often give deeper insights than we can. Adolescents, too, find the Bible appealing, as attested by the popularity of youth scripture groups, but they rarely get to discuss it with their parents.

Start with a prayer, then a short scripture passage and read the exegesis or interpretation of it, found in any good translation. Ask your religious education coordinator, pastor or principal for a good inexpensive translation to use if you don't have one. Many parishes have a variety you can borrow before you decide which fits your family best.

Next, discuss what a passage meant at the time it was written and what it means in our lives today. End with a short prayer and perhaps a hymn.

Meditation is another form of prayer uniquely

suited to the fast pace of family living today. Our family's favorite Advent ritual is that of sitting on the living room floor around the lighted wreath, reading Luke or a prayer and meditating on it for a few moments. Then we have a carol or another piece of scripture, another brief meditative period, a quiet spontaneous sharing kind of prayer, and a closing hymn.

But families don't have to wait until Advent for this. We've had many successful family Lenten sessions by reading something from scriptures, meditating on it, having a prayer and a closing hymn. If your children are young, try some of the children's Bible stories, like the little Arch books or Purple Puzzle books.

Meditating on other readings and prayers is also effective. Try a reading of the Prayer of St. Francis or from any of the many meditation books being produced today, or even a passage from literature that is meaningful and relevant.

Each of the above prayer rituals can take as little as 15 minutes but they can mean as much as a month of religious education to a family in their lifetime spirituality. Don't feel bound by prayer forms of your past. Look at your family and develop some new forms to meet their needs. You'll notice the difference in prayer popularity right away.

The Sacrament of Healing

Years ago Catholics summoned a priest to give "last rites" for one near death. It was an ominous title for these sacramental rituals and often frightened people. Many would delay calling their pastor until the very last minute, since the arrival of the clergy indicated their judgment that death must be certain and imminent.

Around the time of the Second Vatican Council the Church altered the name and taught that "Extreme Unction, which may also and more fittingly be called 'anointing of the sick,' is not a sacrament for those only who are at the point of death."

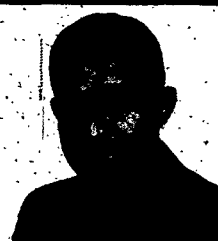
Later, through publication of the revised "Rite of Anointing and Pastoral Care of the Sick," this sacrament took on an additional change, with further emphasis on its power to heal the physically and spiritually ill.

Moreover, prayer groups and charismatic clusters in particular began to stress the biblical teaching on prayer and healing, the importance of the laying on of hands, and the actual experience of persons reportedly cured by these efforts.

The question arises: who may or should be anointed with this sacrament?

The introduction to the reformed rite states a

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Our Church Family

person for eligibility must be "dangerously ill" from sickness or old age. It goes on to clarify this requisite: "A prudent or probable judgment about the seriousness of the sickness is sufficient; in such a case there is no reason for scruples."

Those preliminary guidelines offer some specific illustrations about the kind of persons eligible:

Before surgery. "A sick person should be anointed before surgery whenever a dangerous illness is the reason for the surgery." The March-April, 1979 "Newsletter" from our U.S. Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy deems it inappropriate to anoint one undergoing routine or cosmetic surgery or facing an operation not intended to correct a dangerous situation.

Old people "may be anointed if they are in a weak condition, although no dangerous illness is present." A very liberal interpretation of that directive would be in order here.

Sick children "may be anointed if they have sufficient use of reason to be comforted by this sacrament."

"Adults who have lost consciousness or the use of reason may be anointed if as Christian believers, they would have asked for it were they in control of their faculties."

Emotional or spiritual illness: The Bishops' Committee has this to say about such ailments: "Dangerous illness is not limited to physical malady. For example, someone with definite suicidal tendencies due to mental illness or unbearable emotional pressures may be a candidate for anointing since the sacrament's benefits are spiritual."

The Church approves and encourages communal celebration of this sacrament. However, those to be anointed should fit into the categories noted above and the general principle about being "dangerously ill" ought to be followed.

Indiscriminate anointing of all participants at such a service violates those norms. The Newsletter explicitly comments: "Those who minister to the sick or take part in a communal celebration but are themselves in good health may not be anointed since it weakens and destroys the meaning of anointing as a sacrament for the sick."