

THE POWER OF PRAYER

Spiritual Ministry Team Joins Forces with Nursing Home Residents

"Is any among you sick? Let him bring in the presbyters of the Church, and let him pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up..."

Because a group of parishioners at St. Joseph's parish in Penfield take this message from St. James seriously, residents at the Penfield Nursing Home have known a greater sense of religious community over the past five years.

The spiritual ministry began in August of 1976 when Father James Moynihan, pastor, appointed Catherine Bergeron, a minister of the Eucharist, to serve patients at the nursing home. She performed the ministry on her

own until January 1978 when she was joined by Betty Bartkowiak, and the team concept was born.

Mrs. Bartkowiak has since departed the diocese but now the team is made up of eight members, including one priest, and they visit the home every Wednesday to conduct prayer services and Masses.

Father Steve Kraus, then associate pastor of St. Joseph's, joined the team in the summer of 1978 and is described by Mrs. Bergeron as "one of the prime movers" of the ministry.

"Prayer is the basis of our work," Mrs. Bergeron said.

With that concept, the team is further graced by a backup "powerhouse of prayer," as Mrs. Bergeron termed it, made up of five members who, although not visiting the home weekly,

pray every Wednesday at the same time the team is conducting its service.

When the priest member, currently Father Robert Doell, is on hand, the team conducts a Mass; when he is not, a Communion service is offered.

The priest also anoints anyone who wishes to be every two months.

"All are invited to the services," Mrs. Bergeron said, and residents who are not Catholic attend.

"We are not there to proselytize," she stressed, "but simply to bring the love of God, His joy, His peace, and that's all. It's often very moving because we and the residents often become one body."

What sort of ceremony is it? "We use the penance rite," she said, "but back it up with healing prayers."

The Liturgy of the Word is read, always using the upcoming Sunday's liturgy. Except when a Mass is offered, there is no Canon, but the prayers of the faithful are always used, Mrs. Bergeron said, and the residents join in with spirit.

"We give the very best liturgy available each week," she said. She added that the liturgy has refined itself over the years — "for instance, we cannot use incense because it creates breathing problems for some of the residents."

The home has room for 48 residents but not all can make it to the community room for the service.

"We visit them in their



The team, from left, Helen Barton, Lucy Loomis, Jean Di Meo, Sylvia Yesul, Father Kraus, Dorothy Rittler, Catherine Bergeron and Pearl White. Asked why all (with the exception of the priest member) are women, Mrs. Bergeron answered simply, "Because that's the way God sent 'em."



The backup "powerhouse of prayer" with Father Kraus, from left, Florence Stein, Michael Thomas, Esther Lochner and Eleanor Stutzman.

rooms," Mrs. Bergeron said. "We pray with them there or play religious tapes and records or just chat. Our priest also blesses throats and distributes ashes in their rooms," she said.

Mrs. Bergeron emphasized that each member of the team is well-trained in the ministry.

"I give them training sessions — each of them can set up an altar, each is a sacristan, all are trained readers and each can even serve the Mass.

"We have two ways of praying," Mrs. Bergeron said. "We pray 'over' the residents or 'with' them.

"When we pray 'over' someone we ask the Lord for some help for that person. We never ask for cures; that gives false hope. When we pray 'with' someone it is often for a relative."

The team consists of: Mrs. Sylvia Yesul, member of the parish choir, the Liturgy Committee, the Adult Education Committee and a minister of the Eucharist;

Mrs. Helen Barton, Cur-sillo, charismatic prayer group leader, member of the Intercessory Prayer Group, leader of parish Bible study groups, lector and minister of the Eucharist;

Jean DiMeo, Legion of Mary, Third Order of Carmelites;

Dorothy Rittler, parish choir, minister of the Eucharist, Legion of Mary;

Pearl White and Lucy Loomis, Legion of Mary.

Mrs. Bergeron is a cur-sillista, a charismatic group leader, a member of the Intercessory Prayer Group, the Third Order of St. Dominic, a minister of the Eucharist, a lector and has served with the parish choir and liturgy committee.

In another, but related, vein, Mrs. Bergeron was a medical social worker for 18 years and "my interest has always been with those who are sick."

She explained that more than numbers are involved in the team concept. "We generate spiritual power as a team. We are literally a parish cell representing the whole parish and the Holy Spirit really comes alive through a well-disciplined team."

Discipline is a key, she said. "We do not act on our own as individuals. Care

must be taken in conversation with the residents; one careless question or comment could be devastating.

"And we remember that we must work in conjunction with the other 'teams' at the home — nursing, dietary, administration. We are the spiritual team and must fit in with the others to be effective."

Naturally there are some heartwarming anecdotes. One woman, not a Catholic, was wheeled into the service by a new and zealous attendant. When she saw the priest vesting, she exclaimed, "Oh, no, this is a Catholic service. Get me out of here!"

Another woman, also not a Catholic, Cleo Morgester, 95, and a regular at the services, told her, "What's the matter with you? Don't you know we all worship the same God?"

The woman stayed.

Mrs. Bergeron also tells of the family which practically threw her out their relative's room but who subsequently came regularly to the services, often bringing others with them.

Has there been healing? Yes. Have there been spiritual gains? "Three people came back to the sacraments in the past three months who had been away for years."

But somehow the most important aspect is the community engendered, the ecumenical spirit, the sense of the Holy Spirit and the knowledge imparted that people can really care for each other. That is perhaps what St. James had in mind when he said, "And the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up..."



Father Robert Doell anoints a resident in her room; he anoints residents every two months.

Photos by T. Gordon Masser



When a resident requests, members of the team will pray "over" the person, as Jean Di Meo and Pearl



White are doing at right. At left, Helen Barton and Catherine Bergeron pray "with" a resident.