

The conversation you need to have with loved ones

After nearly 40 years of ministry to those who have lost loved ones, I am struck by how many individuals have never discussed their own deaths and end-of-life wishes. As a society, we ignore the reality of death until a medical crisis occurs and we see those we love experience pain, fear and confusion.

Studies have shown that a majority of us do not want aggressive end-of-life hospital-based treatments. Most of us prefer to die at home as comfortably as possible surrounded by family and friends. Why, then, are 60 percent of Americans dying in hospitals?

It has been proven that aggressive end-of-life care can worsen quality of life and can negatively affect your family's bereavement. As Catholics, we are taught to respect life through natural death. While we must make a sincere effort to sustain life, this belief does not require aggressive fragmented medical care that often solves one symptom of illness while negatively affecting the physical and mental health of the patient.

This was the dilemma my family faced during my mother's final illness until we all agreed to move her from the hospital back to her home at the Jeanne Jugan Residence in

Newark for the last days of her life. Mom wanted to go home. She was blessed to receive the best physical and spiritual care during the final days of her life accompanied by her family, caregivers and fellow residents.



MARK CHRISTIAN

Keep in mind that at some time in your life you may be unable to communicate your healthcare choices because of an accident or serious illness. This is why you need to have the conversation with those you love. How can you prepare?

- Acknowledge that this is an ongoing conversation.
- Know that your loved ones may be uncomfortable and will try to avoid the issue.
- Think about your own wishes, beliefs, values and preferences for end-of-life care. Write them down and add to them as your thoughts continue.
- Include your loved ones in the planning and conversation as soon as you are ready to express them.
- Share your own experiences in dealing with the final illness and death of a parent or other loved one.
- Understand that it is never too soon to talk about end-of-life wishes.

When appointing a medical power of attorney to communicate your end-of-life wishes if you are unable, be sure that the person you appoint can honor your wishes and can make difficult decisions on your behalf.

While it's important to prepare for the practical issues surrounding end of life care, it's important to remember the importance of spiritual and emotional care.

Catholics have the sacrament, anointing of the sick, that assists with both physical and spiritual healing. It is not to be delayed until death is imminent but should be received whenever someone is facing a serious illness, surgery, mental illness and addiction issues. While it may not always result in a physical cure it provides us with the grace that all of us need when facing an uncertain future and possibly our own deaths. This sacrament can be received on more than one occasion as circumstances warrant.

In addition to the sacrament of anointing,

Catholics also have the sacraments of reconciliation for the forgiveness of sins and holy Eucharist for strength during serious illness and the dying process.

Far too many families delay too long in requesting that a priest minister to their sick or dying loved one. The grace given through these sacraments can be a source of comfort to the patient and families who are facing an uncertain future.

Anyone with access to the internet can search out various tools to assist them in planning their end-of-life wishes. One such site is BeginTheConversation.org

As a minister to the bereaved, I can honestly say that it is always best to plan for tomorrow. A few hours spent in honest conversation today will save your loved ones untold anxiety and grief in the future.

Mark Christian is executive director of Catholic Cemeteries for the Diocese of Wilmington.



“Far too many families wait too long in requesting that a priest minister to their dying loved one.”

I know that he Loved me



He brought me flowers
 He dried the dishes
 He carried the groceries
 Kissed me goodnight.
 He prepared me for living without him.
 We planned our final wishes together.
 And selected our place of rest.

I visit him every Sunday.
 I know he still loves me.

Experienced Family Services Representatives can advise you regarding your end-of-life decisions. Contact the cemetery at the phone numbers listed below.

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CATHEDRAL CEMETERY
 2400 Lancaster Ave., Wilmington, DE
302-656-3323

ALL SAINTS CEMETERY
 6001 Kirkwood Hwy., Wilmington, DE
302-737-2524

GATE OF HEAVEN CEMETERY
 32112 Vines Creek Rd., Dagsboro, DE
Toll-free 866-855-3541