FOSTERING A PATIENT'S HAPPINESS AND SENSE OF DIGNITY THROUGH PRAYER

By Julie Grimstad, Patient Advocate

Learn to savor how good the Lord is;
happy are those who take refuge in him.
~ Psalm 34:9

Many years ago, through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, I realized that the elderly and sick people I visited in their own homes, nursing homes, and hospitals needed prayer as much as they needed the air they breathed.

Some of these people were deeply unhappy. Praying with them was good medicine which often had a miraculous cheering-up effect. Through prayer, they discovered or recovered their true dignity and purpose in life – to love God and their neighbors. Instead of feeling useless and alone, their new mission in life became praying for the needs of others and taking refuge in the Lord whenever they longed for companionship and comfort.

Society prizes physical and mental abilities and stigmatizes the loss of certain functions. Therefore, it is no surprise that previously able-bodied and mentally-sound people may equate disability, illness, and aging with loss of dignity. As a result, they may become despondent.

HALO's main concern is the well-being of medically vulnerable individuals. Prayer is an indispensable and fundamental element of HALO's life-affirming mission. Praying with people is a way of assuring them that they are valued by you and especially by God who loves them with an everlasting, unimaginable love.

During a visit with someone who is sick, disabled, or frail, at some point in the conversation, when it feels right, ask, "Would you like me to pray with

you?" The answer is usually "yes." However, if it is "no, pray for the person later in private.

"How do I start?"

Ask questions.
Ask the person if they practice a particular faith. If you are uncomfortable or unfamiliar with his/her prayer traditions or style, ask the person to pray while you listen or pray silently in your own way. Ask if there is anything she/he would like to pray with you about. He/she may be willing to share things that are personally important.

Keep it simple.
Heartfelt prayer is always comforting. Keep it a simple conversation with God.

Use faith-based resources.
Purchase a book of short prayers or use passages of Holy Scripture such as Psalm 23, other Psalms, or The Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13) to begin praying when you are feeling a bit "dry."

If the person asks for help, suggest including some of the following issues in his/her prayers.

- Give thanks for each day, for caregivers, for family and friends, for God's goodness.
- Pray for the welfare and needs of other residents in the nursing home or hospital, as well as for their families.
- Pray for caregivers. (They can even ask their caregivers if they have special prayer requests.)
- Ask for grace in the face of pain and limitations, in circumstances of separation and loss.
- Pray for strength and comfort when facing illness, fear, grief, or death.
- Pray for a forgiving spirit when feeling abandoned or wounded by condescension or ill-treatment.
- Ask for the grace needed to grow in faith and draw closer to the Lord.

Ask the person to pray for you.

Finally, while praying with these precious ones, it would be wise to humbly ask them to pray for you. Those who suffer in body and mind are very dear to the Lord. Their prayers are powerful.

Our suffering brothers and sisters have a dignity that this world may not see but we who believe must remember that whatever we do for them, we do for the Lord himself. (Matt. 25:40)