

# Forming a Gentle, Generous Catholic Heart: Accompanying the Elderly as an Act of Hope

Dr. Marita O'Brien and Heather Keimig, panelists

## Questions for Discussion in the Webinar:

### 1. What is the scope of “the elderly” in the world, our country and our Church?

#### a. Demographics

##### i. US data (US Department of Health & Human Services)

1. 16% of US population are 65+ in 2019, expected to be almost 22% of the population by 2040;
2. Once a 65 year old reaches this age, they can expect to live an additional 19.6 years;
3. About 55% of these are women, with % women increasing throughout lifetime; 64% of men 75+ are married, but only 18% of 75+ women are
4. Differentiate “younger old” (65-84) vs. “oldest old” (85+);
5. 2% of US population are 85+ in 2019, expected to double by 2040;
6. More than 40% of oldest old live alone;

##### ii. Worldwide data (UN)

1. 9% of world population are 65+, expected to be 16% by 2050;
2. Survival beyond age 65 is improving worldwide;

##### iii. Catholics

1. 26% of all US adult Catholic population, 20% of all Catholics in 2021 (CARA: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate);
2. PEW Research Center: Religious Landscape Study (2014);

Older Catholics in the United States	
Category	Rate
US Catholics	20.80%
Catholics 65+	20%
Cohort: Baby Boomer	28%
Cohort: Silent	65%
Cohort: Greatest	8%
Attendance at Religious Services: At least 1x/wk	56%
Attendance at Religious Services: Once or twice a month/ a few times a year	25%
Attendance at Religious Services: Seldom/never	18%
Attendance at Religious Services: Don't know	1%
Frequency of Prayer: At least daily	72%
Frequency of Prayer: Weekly	14%
Frequency of Prayer: Monthly	4%
Frequency of Prayer: Seldom/never	9%
Frequency of Prayer: Don't know	2%

3.

##### iv. Caregiving ((US Department of Health & Human Services; AARP))

1. About two-thirds of individuals receiving help with daily living receive only informal (unpaid) care;
2. Informal caregivers for older Americans provide 75-80% of total care hours;
3. 34% of informal caregivers are 65+, dedicating on average 30+ hours/week in caregiving;

4. Primary caregivers of individuals with dementia spent 9 hours/day providing help;
  - b. How do we even talk about them without offense?!
    - i. No term for those who are over 65 or 70 suits all: senior, elder, older, even ancient!
    - ii. "Senior means discount."
    - iii. Term might change based on amount of impairment, with a healthy 80yo and a greatly infirm 80yo feeling very different about themselves
- 2. As Catholics, how should we be thinking about our latter years of life? As Catholics who might be caring for someone who is "nearing the finish line," how should we be thinking about this act of service? Although we often think and hear about the troubles and hardships of our older years, what does our Church have to say about the silver lining to that storm cloud in front of most of us?**
- a. Elders have the gift of time:
    - i. Opportunity to attend to their "neighbors"; can call or write to those they are unable to be physically present to.
    - ii. Elders can pray: one particular gift of time that is perhaps above all others in value is the gift of time to pray for the work on the Kingdom of Heaven, for the souls of those they love, for our country, and so forth.
    - iii. Elders may mis-judge how much longer they have of more "vibrant" or healthy years, particularly if that last few years becomes filled with medical issues, and/or cognitive decline, so should be encouraged to take stock
  - b. Elders have a chance to practice virtues they may have dismissed earlier in life; to grow in holiness before the end actually comes
    - i. "Facing finals",
    - ii. How can we remember on the one hand that we are now just pilgrims on earth destined for a homeland that is not here but on the other hand also remembering that we cannot just live in the future? As Pope Benedict said in *Spe salvi*, "only when the future is certain as a positive reality does it become possible to live the present as well."
    - iii. Finding integrity in their lives, recognizing good they've done & what has been done to them & in them, as well as the bad. In this midst of this life review, coming to their own conclusion that their life has been meaningful and worthwhile.
    - iv. This is a time to renew the religious sense, to remember this inborn thirst and desire to discover something - or Someone - that will truly satisfy all of our desires and longing. The revival of spiritual seeking even among baby boomers raised and living in fully secular environments feel this desire for the transcendent.
    - v. Note this will look different for young old compared to oldest old. In young old, there's time and opportunity to discover and use latent gifts of the Holy Spirit for the community. For the oldest old with less time and abilities, this may look more like recognizing God's perfect timing in still being able to be grateful for the hidden opportunities to share their gifts, even if one didn't recognize the Giver. From the latter group, this recognition can spur a desire to evangelize their family and friends to connect with Christ and His Church.

- c. Elders have the gift of experience: can witness to younger people about their successes and their failures
  - i. “I stayed close to the Church all my life.” Or “I wish I hadn’t left the Church for all those years, but I’m so glad I’m back now.”
  - ii. Have decades of accumulated skills and/or experience that can be of benefit to younger generations; add a great wealth in a parish community
  - iii. Pope Francis often talks about the wisdom of elders. They’ve seen changes in the Church and in their churches, and typically they react less strongly to negative events than younger people do.
  - iv. In attending lectures to improve their faith formation or teach the faith, they model lifelong learning of the faith to younger people. Many young-old people relish this opportunity to continue learning to maintain cognitive fitness.
- d. Elders typically lead slower-paced lives and can develop the virtue of gratitude in response to so many gifts from the Lord through their lives; they can cultivate joy – especially in small things – with time to notice them.

### **3. What can parishes (or dioceses) do?**

- a. Get to know the Elders in your parish community; they are quite often really neat people! Do you take time, for instance, to hang around after daily Mass when the older people tend to gather for prayer and donuts?
- b. Allow some ministry focus on the spiritual needs of the elderly in the parish, which will include some socializing to increase sense of belonging as well as their specific spiritual needs. The goal is to help people unblock their religious sense to make them open and eager for salvation, even if they have had large parts of their life that make it seem like salvation is impossible for them.
  - i. Do you focus on the parish’s children & young adults, hoping not to lose them to the culture? How do you serve the Catholics over 65 who have left the Church and with whom we have far fewer years to win them back and help them be ready to die in the arms of the Church? Do you invite conversations with them about how being Catholic is not just part of their cultural identity, but part of their identity as a member of a worldwide body with a shared destination that lasts forever? Perhaps this identity is bigger than they have ever imagined (e.g., lifelong Italian Catholic who discovers their devotion to Mary is similar to that of a lifelong Filipino Catholic?
  - ii. Do you ever have daytime programming offered?
  - iii. Do you have Adoration during the day? How can elements of the US focus on Eucharistic revival be oriented to the needs of older people?
  - iv. Do you offer any programming specifically for the elderly in a parish?
  - v. Even just inviting single people to connect after Mass to go out to eat after Mass can be a huge help for people living alone, tired of eating alone as well.
  - vi. Can you provide the caregivers with suggestions of spiritual reading to be read aloud with the elderly loved one; helping them grow spiritually even as death approaches.
  - vii. Do you encourage the caregivers to regularly pray with the elderly? Have you talked with them about how this prayer can be a point of connection and renewed trust in God? The rosary, with its focus on Mary’s role in Christ’s life,

- might help them to contemplate their own openness to the possibilities of God's mysterious action in their lives.
- viii. Can you make sure you regularly provide Confession to the homebound & nursing home residents, without the caregiver needing to always ask?
  - ix. How do you ensure that the homebound & nursing home residents receive the Eucharist regularly? Does your method of making sure this happens need some work?
  - x. Can you invite long-time parishioners to create memory boxes of special events, celebrations, and other aspects of their parish life that represent the importance of the parish and God in their life? These time capsules could be part of parish celebrations for milestone anniversaries. Inviting older people to talk about these memories can also help them recognize God's presence and Providence through their lives and those of family members. Don't let these experiences remain at the surface but help your parishioners uncover their encounters with God. You may find opportunities in these conversations to suggest how the pleasure and satisfaction they felt in belonging to the Church is more than temporary satisfactions but provides a window to God's Providence and care.
- c. Reach out to the elderly with support for the needs they have at this time in their life
    - i. Can you connect younger people with the older ones, matching needs with resources – needs in the elderly or in the middle aged!
  - d. Minister to the caregivers of the elderly
    - i. Could you suggest a book club or other small, social type gathering that could offer support and fellowship to those adults who are caregiving? What are the barriers for their joining these? Would online meetings be an option?
    - ii. Can you, as a parish, identify and connect elder caregivers in your parish (or with neighboring parishes), so they can be a support to one another?
    - iii. These people may not even know about each other, so connecting them with someone in a similar situation can be a great gift of comfort and encouragement
    - iv. Do they need respite care to provide them with an occasional break? Even if you don't have the resources, there should be a local Area Agencies on Aging whose role is to coordinate services. Letting people know you care & helping them learn about resources is one way to do this.
    - v. Can you ask the caregivers how you can support them better?
  - e. Provide accompaniment and accountability for the elderly in a parish
    - i. Elders need to grow in holiness, too! Do you help them to do this, or allow them to remain in their favorite sins?
    - ii. How do you discuss the paradox of suffering? Do you acknowledge that the suffering they may be experiencing, physical and psychological, is real but is neither punishment for sins of them or family members nor random assignment from a dismissive God? Instead, discussions with them about how past suffering has borne fruit and that it is part of the adventure of a truly human life? Only God can truly carry this burden, and the Cross shows His accompanying us in the most difficult times in the past, now, and in the future? This latter part may be essential to prepare people for the reality of the pain that their final days on earth may provide.

- iii. What creative ideas can the elderly in your parish come up to foster fellowship and spiritual growth? (Rosary after Masses, book club, grandparents helping in local school, tutoring children after school, visiting home bound of parish, bringing the Eucharist to the local nursing home, etc.)
      - iv. Send cards to home bound elders & nursing home residents, perhaps those created by people in various religious formation classes or bible studies? Belonging is such an important need.
    - f. Protect the dignity of the elderly in their midst
      - i. Do you have a designated place for those who cannot move easily to sit in Mass where Father will know to bring them the Eucharist?
      - ii. Is speaking properly magnified throughout the nave, so that it is easy to hear Father, regardless of where one sits?
      - iii. Are song sheets, bulletins, flyers, etc. accessible for those with lower vision?
      - iv. If livestream services are provided, do your parishioners (especially homebound) know how to use them? Are they accessible (e.g., song sheets in large print).
      - v. Do you have hand rails, ramps and other assistive helps in place to make accessing the parish safe for someone not perfectly able-bodied?
      - vi. Is there a bathroom handy? Does it have grab bars, raised seat?
      - vii. Are parking lots carefully lit?
      - viii. Do you offer anything for parishioners during the daytime, when older people tend to feel safer and more interested/comfortable in coming out of their homes?
    - g. Connect specific help to the elderly
      - i. Do your older parishioners (and, frankly, younger, ones!) know what the Church says about end-of-life care? Can you bring in a speaker on that subject or make yourself enough of an expert to help yourself.
      - ii. Is there someone in your local community, or a nearby one, who can give legal advice from a Catholic perspective – Wills, Power of Attorney, DNR, etc.
      - iii. Similarly, can you do something to help increase the knowledge of your parishioners on matters of medical-legal issues, like DNR and final medical wishes, etc.
      - iv. Can you ensure that the elders of your parish are connected to younger parishioners who can assist with transportation gaps that exist? Knowing where your parishioners live can make this relatively simple to connect people with empty seats in a car with someone not too far away who needs a ride. Transportation is a big issue among older people and those with disabilities.
      - v. Bereavement support for loss of spouse, siblings, children. How is the parish a place to help mourners mourn? Are you aware of the Red Bird Ministry? ([www.redbird.love](http://www.redbird.love))
- 4. What can families do? How can younger Catholics (middle-aged and less) be encouraged to creatively rise above the typical American cultural barriers to caring for the elders in their life?**
- a. Everybody already works outside the home (two incomes, day school): Americans often have fallen into the trap of two incomes outside the home, with children off in a school for most of the day, in order to “make enough” to live on;

- i. What if we challenged ourselves to live more simply and have one parent home?
  - ii. What if we combined the financial assets of the elderly with that of the working adult(s) and lived together?
  - iii. What if even young adult children contributed to the finances of the home?
  - iv. These are things that were totally normal not too long ago in our country and they could be returned to, again
  - v. This is a counter-cultural solution to elder care, for sure, but it isn't impossible. Who in your parish might be willing to start thinking about this kind of solution to question of "what to do about Mom"?
- b. Sibling coordination troubles: could be too many siblings wanting to help, could be tension between siblings who help/don't help, could be that sibling rivalry is alive and well ("You were always Mom's favorite, so you take care of her!"), or well-meaning siblings live at distance from "Mom" and the nearby sib bears the burden of care because of proximity
- i. When you see such troubles in a parishioner's family (either through the eyes of the caregiver or the elderly person), can you encourage the siblings to seek counseling or some other way to work out their problems before "Mom" passes on? It will take courage!
  - ii. Can you encourage "Mom" to walk carefully amongst bickering siblings, so as not to further damage any peace or truce they may form?
  - iii. Are there other members of the congregation who can be encouraged to go visit the homebound, or even give respite to the caregivers for periods of time?
- c. Elder doesn't want to be a burden, so doesn't give an opportunity for youngers to serve them : don't want to "be a burden"
- i. Can these Elders be challenged to consider what they give up by making this choice (when such a choice is possible), such as the opportunity to have time to build a relationship with children and grandchildren, the opportunity to teach the loved ones how to serve those weaker?
  - ii. Can the Elders be challenged to consider that becoming more infirm requires care, there is no alternative. Why would they choose to rely on strangers, rather than their loved ones when their needs rise?
  - iii. Can the Elders be challenged to consider that their loved ones will either "be burdened" by their care, or by the need to find time to come visit them in a place where (presumably) all their needs are being met and the only purpose is to "hang out." Both are burdens; one may even require the expense of air travel, etc.
- d. Relationships are broken before need for care arises, live far apart, separate lives
- i. Has the Lord provided someone else to care for you? "Adopted parents/grandparents" might be right under your nose.
  - ii. Can the Elder parishioner be encouraged to invest in the lives of those in your community, church, etc.? Is he/she "known" to the community? As people get older and all of their friends/siblings pass away, how does your parish support helping people connect with others in this new phase of life? How can you invite them to belong when they are younger to build this trust that will be necessary later?

- iii. How can parishioners be encouraged to reach out to the elderly in the parish community (in home, or in nursing home, etc.) and walk through life together? Bringing the Eucharist, visiting for birthdays, sharing life's highs and lows, utilizing the skills/expertise of the Elder, praying for one another
- e. If a relationship *\*could\** be mended (or was not broken), can the Elder, as the non-employed person, move to your extended family and overcome your own preferences (warmer weather, etc.)?
  - i. Could the Elders in your community be encouraged to see the value in giving their remaining years to their loved ones through relationship, time, sharing expertise?
  - ii. Being open to how your life will be enriched through this change in your family connection.

## Resources that might help, among many others:

- **The Precious Gift of Old Age: How to Make the Golden Years the Best of Your Life**, Fr. John LaFarge S.J.
  - “The fear of growing old is a universal burden. Here’s the book you need to ensure that you move into and through old age with grit and grace. Fr. John LaFarge shows you how to conquer any fear of aging — and how to make your golden years the best years of your life. At age 84, Fr. LaFarge was struck by the many advantages and blessings of aging, and he observed that modern men and women have lost touch with the traditional view of old age as the crowning summit of life. Seeing old age instead as a calamity, he says, is what makes aging such a misery for many. In these insightful and encouraging pages, Fr. John helps you recognize that old age has its own inherent meaning and that the wisest thing we can do when it creeps up on us is to explore this meaning and adopt a general plan of action to profit from it. Specifically, you will learn how to overcome loneliness and assist others who are suffering from the pains of poverty or neglect. Fr. LaFarge addresses the challenges of caring for elderly people who are too sick to live at home and require admission to nursing homes. He also clarifies the duties of the younger generations toward those in old age and how it is incumbent upon them to turn the tide of our utilitarian culture of death.” – from Amazon
- **Minding Our Elders: Caregivers Share Their Personal Stories**, Carol Bradley Bursack
  - “Minding our Elders: Caregivers Share Their Personal Stories is a portable support group, a reminder you aren't alone. Each story about caring for the elderly is self-contained. The storyteller knows your pain in watching a loved one suffer, the joy of giving of oneself, and the emotional and physical exhaustion of the whole experience. Minding Our Elders is an intimate and powerful resource for caregivers, filled with true stories about caregivers and aging parents.” – from Amazon
  - Heather Keimig: highly recommend to feel like you have a little window into the “ends” of a variety of people and those who loved them; writer’s style is beautiful and she clearly loved those who were given to her personal care; a gem of a book
- **Sharing the Wisdom of Time**, Pope Francis
  - “One day, while at prayer, Pope Francis was inspired to shine a light on the vital role of grandparents and other elders and the life-changing wisdom they have to share. *Sharing the Wisdom of Time* is the culmination of the Holy Father's vision. Elders from over 30 countries share their wisdom carved from lifetimes of experience. From a blind basket-weaver in Kenya to a centenarian midwife in Guatemala who has delivered 10,000 babies, every story is a testament to the power of faith, perseverance, human resilience, and love. Pope Francis contributes as a fellow elder, offering the Preface and his own story in each chapter, while also reflecting on dozens of others' stories.” – from Amazon
- **Aging: Fulfillment of Life**, Henri Nouwen
  - “Even typical undergraduates in my human development courses found this book to be a thought-provoking read about the meaning of age and reflection on human dignity that is especially poignant when different generations spend time together.” – from Marita O’Brien
  - “We are all aging. We are each a spoke on the great wheel of life, part of the ongoing cycle of growth. In *Aging*, Henri J.M. Nouwen and Walter J. Gaffney share some moving and inspirational thoughts on what aging means (and can mean) to all of us, whether we're in our youth, middle age, or later years. Enhanced by some eighty-five



photographs depicting various scenes from life and nature, this book shows how to make the later years a source of hope rather than a time of loneliness -- a way out of darkness into the light. "Aging," the authors write, "is not a reason for despair, but a basis of hope, not a slow decaying, but a gradual maturing, not a fate to be undergone but a chance to be embraced." And they remind us of our responsibility to incorporate the aged into the fabric of our own lives -- helping them become teachers again so they may help us repair the fragmented connections between generations. ..." – from Amazon

- **The Art of Dying**, Bro. Columba Thomas
  - "The Medicalization of dying and the disregard for the life of the soul within contemporary health care prompt the return of the *ars moriendi*, or The Art of Dying. This widely influential fifteenth-century text was designed to guide dying persons and their loved ones in Catholic religious practices at a time when access to a priest and the sacraments was similarly limited. This remarkable and inspiring work serves as a valuable resource for Catholic today, encouraging their full participation in the rich sacramental and liturgical tradition of the Church and challenging them to keep their eyes fixed on Christ and the promise of eternal life with him. ..." – from Amazon
- **Travelers to Unimaginable Lands: Stories of Dementia, the Caregiver, and the Human Brain**, Dasha Kiper (not yet released)
  - "Why is taking care of a family member with dementia so difficult? Why do caregivers succumb to behaviors—arguing, blaming, insisting, taking symptoms personally—they know are counterproductive? Exploring the healthy brain's intuitions and proclivities, *Travelers to Unimaginable Lands* reveals the neurological obstacles to caregiving, enumerating not only the terrible pressures the disease exerts on our closest relationships but offering solace and perspective as well." – from Amazon
  - Edited article length by the book's author available here: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/feb/28/dinner-with-proust-how-alzheimers-caregivers-are-pulled-into-their-patients-worlds>
  - Another excellent article by the same author here: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/oct/20/the-deviousness-of-dementia>
- **Care of the Ancient Ones: Gentle Eldercare in the Rough-and-Tumble World of Modern**, Judith Murphy Millar
  - "The Ancient Ones—the oldest of the old—are the fastest-growing segment of our society. The vast majority of them have some sort of physical disability and/or memory impairment. They need help. Consider these facts: • 6.5 million people are over age 85. • 20–50 million people serve as untrained or unpaid family caregivers. • Up to 40 percent of hospitalized elderly suffer an adverse effect from treatment. • \$200- \$300 billion are spent annually on this care. This book discusses goals, approaches, and issues and will help you • Develop individualized health goals and a realistic approach for the remainder of life. • Focus on issues that promote comfort, safety, and independence with practical measures. • Assess important changes in the status of an elder and enhance communication between patient advocates and healthcare providers. • Protect elders from unwanted or futile medical care. Since 1987, Judith Millar has been caring for elderly patients on Cape Ann, Massachusetts. A Nurse Practitioner with experience, compassion, and common sense, she helps Ancient Ones and their families at the

crossroad of health, illness, independence, frailty, and end of life, guiding them through the last leg of a very long journey.” – from Amazon

- **Blessings of Age**, US Conference of Catholic Bishops ([www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org)); available in Spanish
  - 1999 document provides bishops’ statement and support for improving the Church’s service of and attention to older people. In particular, highlights responsibility of parishes to catechize older people so they can transmit faith to future generations
- **The Dignity of Older People and Their Mission in the Church and in the World**, Pontifical Council for the Laity ([www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va))
  - 1998 document provides worldwide perspective on the meaning and value of old age, the older person in the Bible, review of how older people’s problems are the problems of all of us, and guidelines for the pastoral care of older people.
- **Spe Salvi**, Pope Benedict XVI ([www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va))
  - 2007 encyclical is a treasure of Pope Benedict’s writings about hope, with examples from Scripture and Catholic saints. This encyclical is quite readable.
- **Catechesis on Old Age**, Pope Francis’s general audience from June 1, 2022 ([www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va))
  - Lovely summary of his own reflections as he himself experiences the frailty of old age;
- **Resources on parish accessibility**
  - National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD) website has a wide set of resources for helping individuals with disabilities and their caregivers across the lifespan. Includes accessibility checklists and a wide set of other resources.
- **Patron saints for older people**
  - St. Jeanne Jugan, founder of Little Sisters of the Poor, who care for the elderly poor;
  - St. John the Evangelist, who cared for the Blessed Mother after Jesus’ death and Ascension;
  - St. Andre, patron saint of family caregivers in Canada
  - Sts. Anne & Joachim, parents of the Blessed Mother, patron saints of grandparents;
  - St. Vicetia Lopez: enlisted her older mother to come help with her ministry to serve young girls;
  - St. Albert the Great; great scientist whose later years were marked by lack of lucidity;
  - St. Louis Martin; St. Therese’s father who suffered from dementia after multiple strokes;

## Other Helpful Tidbits to Consider:

- What is the difference between hope and optimism?
  - Karl M. Menninger, MD: “The optimist, like the pessimist, emphasizes the importance of ‘I.’ But hope is humble, it is modest, it is selfless. Unconcerned with ambiguity of past experience, hope implies process; it is an adventure, a going forward, a confident search.” (from *\*The Precious Gift of Old Age\** by LaForge, p. 25)
  - “People in Fidel Castro’s Cuban prison were fortunate when they resisted the very urgent and natural inclination to despair. They “hoped,” optimistically trusted, that sometime, somewhere, they might be able to escape and find their way out to freedom. This mood was not a bad thing; it helped to sustain them and to keep them from demoralization. But it was very different from an objective hope experienced when by good fortune, their ransom was paid and they found themselves with a visa and an airplane ticket in their hands, ready to embark upon the coveted voyage. The visa and the ticket are still but “witnesses” – lowly objects that bear testimony to the reality of the future departure. But the hope they inspired was based on the objective reality, and the subjective certainty that the ticket and the visa called forth was of a totally different category from that caused by a merely happy disposition.” (from *\*The Precious Gift of Old Age\** by LaForge, p. 26)
  - Can we remember that our *\*hope\** is based on the actions and promises of our all-powerful Savior? Heaven is real and so is Purgatory and Hell. The power of the Sacraments is salvific.
- If nothing happens outside of the eye of the Lord, then we have to trust that He is working through even the difficulties of caring for an elderly loved one for the good of ALL involved. This is His *\*whole work\** - to heal our wounds, to make us yearn for Heaven, to teach us how to draw the souls around us closer to Himself.
  - The Lord loves both the Elder who is in need of care and the one who is doing the caregiving. He is working for the good of both in this precious time at the end of a life.
- We are saved in bunches. We can not survive and thrive without “the other.” This is most obvious when we are frail or at the end of our lives.
  - It *\*is\** a sacrifice to care for an elderly person, but it is *\*also\** a sacrifice to care for a small child or anyone with significant handicaps of any type. All of these things draw us out of our selfishness, which makes us more like Christ.
  - When we are generous to the soul of another, we share Christ’s love with him/her. I cannot always (or often or even ever) fix the pain/discomfort of my loved one, but I can always make him/her feel safe and cared for, hear the stories he/she wants to tell, resonate with the joys (big and small) he/she experiences and meet him/her where she is at on any given day/night.
  - Like priests, we also are called to be “all things to all people” – mothering small children is very similar to caring for an elderly person, especially when he/she has dementia, it’s just done in reverse, as the loved one loses independence and faculties, rather than gaining such.
- How can the elder be encouraged to feel useful in ways that are safe for him/her? Can their skills/expertise be put to use?
  - Tutoring grandchildren or others
  - Able-bodied “grands” can drive kids to needed appointments or other sorts of meetings, freeing the parents to do other things
  - Are there projects that the Elder can tackle and accomplish, with some help and time?
  - Are there ways the Elder can give to those who are less fortunate with their time or abilities? Knitting scarves for homeless, baking for fund-raisers, time and attention to those who need it
  - Prayer for all around them, even if they are completely bed-bound
- Nurturing those who are weak is the call of every person, especially women.
  - It is a supernatural grace laid over whatever natural virtues you may already have (or not have)
  - How will you respond to the graces being provided for you?

- Do you actually seek the good in the one who is weak and needy? Are you on their page, or is it “lip service” done with impatience?
- Is it possible to call the elderly person forward in virtue, helping him/her to grow in grace? (or are they mentally not able b/c of dementia, etc?)
- When we nurture children, we expect them to grow and mature; do we still expect this of the elderly we love and assist, too? Until we are dead, we aren’t dead! Don’t give up! Human beings are always capable of change; we are not “old dogs”.
- It can be hard to find a balance between all the roles you may have (a daughter, a servant, an advocate and a sister-in-Christ), but we must also have hope and trust that the Lord is pouring out grace on \*us\* in our roles, too; this role is for \*our\* good, too
- All called to patience! The only way to grow in patience is to have your current amount of patience challenged!
  - Acknowledge out loud that it is hard to repeat something many times
  - Acknowledge out loud that it is hard to move at a slower pace than your preferred one
  - Acknowledge out loud that it is hard to accommodate to “old fashioned” practices or simply ways of life that aren’t your own (writing checks, dressing in certain ways, other rhythms of daily life)
  - Take your struggles to Confession and forgive yourself, as well
  - Strive for a growth in the virtues; the Lord is always building our souls for plans He has for our futures
- Most of us these days will die of the troubles of old age, rather than die from some catastrophe before old age takes us. How do we want to be cared for?
  - While you are busy seeing to the end years of an Elder in your life, are you considering what is being said and done around your children that will come back to you in your end years?
  - If you show your children that “Grandma” (whatever her personality may be) is actually a burden by the way you talk about her when you are not around her, that is the message your children will actually internalize.
  - Are you seeking to mend relationships with your children, etc., so that your own proverbial house is in order when your last years come?
- What is it like to watch a parent (or similar loved one) grow weaker and frailer and need to step up the amount of care you provide for them?
  - Can you educate yourself through books, friends, and so forth, so you have some sense of “readiness” when the day comes that you need to give care?
  - Do you have relationships in place you can lean into when your stress level rises with more and more care?
  - Is your own spiritual life in order, so that you can lean into the Lord more perfectly as the challenges rise?
- What messages are you reinforcing to the elder in your life about your role in their last days?
  - Do they feel like a burden?
  - Do they feel safe and cared for?
  - Are they safe and cared for, or could you be doing something more?
  - Do they trust you, their primary caregiver?
- How can we as middle-aged folks (or younger) increase the amount of care we give the elderly in our lives now, rather than waiting until they are in danger or desperate?
  - Many small steps are needed along the way, often
  - Can you train your eyes to notice when a new task needs to be “shared,” or simply taken over, in the life of your loved one? (Don’t wait until there is laundry piled up before offering to help, or simply doing the task.)
  - Can you remember to do these tasks with a cheerful, willing heart?
- Can you love your “elderly person” more carefully and with more deliberateness now? What will that look like today?

- Perhaps your elderly loved one doesn't need care, in tangible ways, at this time. How can you reach out in love to them in other ways, to strengthen a sense of trust and authentic love between you, so that that bond is strong when the need level rises?
- Texts, phone calls, notes in the mail, small purchases that you know will be a blessing to the loved one? Be creative!
- How can you tend to your own (as caregiver's) emotional and spiritual well-being to sustain you through the "disconnecting" that will happen with the elderly person's changes, dementia, eventual death?
  - We must seek to have our spirit satisfied with Our Lord, first and foremost, so that others are "gravy" and the loss is minimized. It may be that caring for this loved one is how the Lord is inviting you into further dependence on Him, inviting you to disconnect your emotional dependence on the one who is dying.
  - Is the Lord wanting to urge you and your siblings to repair damaged relationships or strengthen loose bonds, as "Mom's" death becomes more imminent?
  - Is the Lord using the approaching end of "Mom's" life as a spurring on in your own heart to get things right with Him, to seek Confession and restore your own relationship with Him and His Church?
  - Can you identify (be creative!) others in your community who are doing similar types of care as you are and can you be a blessing to each other – text buddies (or similar), book club, something!
- What can you do with the time remaining in the life of the elder? How can you refocus their days on the things of Heaven and Our Lord?
  - Is your loved one far from the Lord, or farther than they could be? Could you read spiritual reading aloud to them and talk about it?
  - Could you see to it that they have access to a priest for Confession regularly?
  - Could you pray together regularly?
- For the larger community, who can be encouraged to visit the elderly? Perhaps the family can care for the elder, but they cannot supply all the social needs he/she has.
  - Are you able to go visit someone who is homebound once a week, or every other week, to be a blessing to them and a bright spot in their day/week?
  - Even more true of those in nursing homes, or who are estranged from their family.