

Family Life † Respect Life ARCHDIOCESE of NEW YORK

WE WAIT IN JOYFUL HOPE

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As Little Sisters, we care exclusively for the elderly, and we have each had the privilege of accompanying hundreds of people from the moment they come into our homes to the moment when, in great weakness, they hand over their lives definitively to the Father. Sometimes the complete process of accompaniment takes a few months, sometimes twenty years or more.

The Little Sisters encourage the families, staff, volunteers, and other Residents to take part in this adventure of accompanying. There are joyful, exhilarating moments and moments marked by loneliness, doubt, and pain. Through it all, the Residents get the message, "You are not alone!" They know they are part of a large family, and they feel secure.

In our homes, we never leave the dying Residents alone. The Little Sisters take it in turns, day and night, to stay with them and to accompany them according to their needs, according to their own desires and religious beliefs. Using the means that palliative medicine offers us today, we try to ensure that every Resident is comfortable and free of pain. There is a profound peace in the Resident's room. There are flowered sheets and family photos, a favorite old chair and religious symbols. The family members, when there is a family, are welcomed at the bedside day and night, participating in the Resident's care, if they so wish. Other Residents are in and out of the room all day long. Seeing that their friend is well-surrounded at this time removes some of their own fears of dying. Unlike some hospitals or other facilities, where dying persons can feel quite isolated, the room of a dying Resident becomes, in a certain sense, the center of the entire home during this period.

Keeping vigil at the bedside of a dying Resident is a gift that we receive from our fourth vow of hospitality. It is a watching with and a waiting for Jesus himself. It is a privilege to be with our Residents as they begin to resemble Jesus in his passion and death and to support them in the face of the fear and loneliness that this moment can sometimes bring. We stay with them and care for them, trying to relieve the same sufferings that Jesus endured: abandonment, pain, difficulty in breathing, an agonizing thirst. Yet when the moment of death comes, peace is fully present—a peace that only God brings about in his love and mercy.

In the stories that follow, Little Sisters share their thoughts, reflections, and years of experience in accompanying the elderly to the gate of heaven.

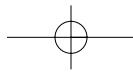


As mother of souls, a Little Sister always sees the care of the dying as the high point of her vocation. Consciously or unconsciously, the Residents of our homes are all preparing for the great encounter, and we accompany them to the end. Despite the joyous and peaceful atmosphere that prevails, death and dying is always present in our homes, especially in the nursing units. We watch with a certain sadness as our Residents become more dependent and frail each successive year. Eventually comes the time when progressive frailty and diminishment portend that the end of this earthly life is near. The goal at this time is always maximum comfort and presence day and night. Every life is entirely unique, and in a way, so is every death. Some Residents reach this stage without awareness of what is really happening, although at the same time, they are well-prepared to meet their Maker. Others are aware, like the Resident who told me, "I've got 4 to 6 months to live. I'm dying gracefully." Some Residents, who may be excellent Christians, know they are nearing death but don't want to talk about it or be reminded of it. Then it is for us Little Sisters to discreetly find the best approach to speak with them. A Resident who is currently terminally ill and knows that the end of the road is not far off peacefully accepts the idea of being on a journey and that he is now passing through an important stage of this journey. He finds hope and peace in the phrase used in the liturgy: "life is changed, not ended," and that Christ has gone before us to give us courage and to take us where he is. "That where I am, you also may be" (Jn 14:2). But love, empathy, sensitivity, and caring must be communicated at all times throughout the process of dying, if the Resident is going to feel accompanied to the end. This is a truly sacred time when we are faced with one of life's greatest mysteries. By words of loving concern, short prayers, simple touches, and so many other gestures of love, we are with them. —Sr. A.



During the years that I have had the grace of serving as a Eucharistic minister, I have often reflected on how that role complements my vocation of Little Sister of the Poor. As a Eucharistic minister, I touch the Body of Christ in the person of the elderly poor. And as the bodies of the elderly grow near to the moment of death, the vigil that we Little Sisters share at their bedside challenges us to live the contemplative dimension of our vocation to the full. At this moment we are looking at Christ living his passion and death in the elderly person who is making up in his body "what is lacking in the passion of Christ."





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I am in reverent awe at the sacredness of this moment. As many times as I have assisted at the death of a Resident, the experience is always new, because it is the life of a unique individual that is ending. Often family members are at the bedside as well, and through their conversations and reminiscences, I am privileged to catch a glimpse of who this person was before I came to know him at the end of his life.

Frequently the elderly person seems to be unresponsive as death approaches, but this may never lead us to assume that he cannot hear, feel, or continue to grow in the life of grace. I encourage families to talk to the Resident and to hold his hand. It is important to balance praying familiar prayers out loud with moments of silence during which I offer the Resident's last moments in union with the passion of Christ. The sign of the cross traced on the Resident's forehead with a drop of holy water repeats a gesture he has often made during his life. The Little Sister's presence is a prayerful one, and I cannot forget to ask God for all the graces that the Resident needs as he prepares to enter eternal life.

However, I believe that a Little Sister's role in assisting a Resident to prepare for a holy and peaceful death begins at the moment that the Resident comes to live in the home. As the Little Sister gets to know the Resident and a bond of trust develops between them, she discovers areas of the Resident's life that may need healing. Sometimes it is a sin from many years ago, or it could be an estrangement within the family that will stand in the way of a peaceful death if not resolved. I once took care of a lovely lady who told me on her deathbed that she had had an abortion many years before and was tormented by the thought of it. I called the parish down the street, since our chaplain wasn't available. Father came at once (I'll never forget his name: Fr. Darling), and after he heard her confession, a peace settled over Anna that was undisturbed until her death.

Whenever possible all the Little Sisters in the home come to the Resident's room at the moment of death. We pray aloud, sing, and help and support the family members, if they are present. Other Residents and staff members join us as the Resident enters eternal life. There is real grief and sorrow—we come to love the Residents and their families—but there is a profound peace and joy. And we now have another intercessor who will surely not forget us! —Sr. M.



As a Little Sister of the Poor, I have prayed at the bedside of many Residents who have died. Whether they slipped away peacefully or after a long period of illness and suffering, they seemed transfigured in those last moments with an inner glow, a beautiful radiance; I am always reminded of a Little Sister's words years ago: "Just think! The last persons they see on earth are those who are beside them in their dying moments. When their eyes close in death, they open

them to gaze on the face of God as he welcomes them into eternal life. They remember those who cared for them on earth and speak to him of them. They bring us close to heaven and bring heaven close to us!" And I know that I am witnessing the most important moment in an elderly person's life: the moment just before they close their eyes to gaze on the face of God and hear those welcoming words: "Well done, good and faithful servant... Receive the joy prepared for you from all eternity!" —Sr. E.



As the time of death draws near, the boundaries between heaven and earth seem to blur. Following our tradition, we held a lighted blessed candle in the Resident's hand as she was taking her last breath. The Scripture passage about the wise virgins with their lamps lit came alive as the Lord called her to himself. —Sr. J.



The request which arises from the human heart in the supreme confrontation with suffering and death, especially when faced with the temptation to give up in utter desperation, is above all a request for companionship, sympathy and support in the time of trial. It is a plea for help to keep on hoping when all human hopes fail. As the Second Vatican Council reminds us: "It is in the face of death that the riddle of human existence becomes most acute" and yet "man rightly follows the intuition of his heart when he abhors and repudiates the absolute ruin and total disappearance of his own person. Man rebels against death because he bears in himself an eternal seed which cannot be reduced to mere matter".

This natural aversion to death and this incipient hope of immortality are illumined and brought to fulfillment by Christian faith, which both promises and offers a share in the victory of the Risen Christ: it is the victory of the One who, by his redemptive death, has set man free from death, "the wages of sin" (Rom 6:23), and has given him the Spirit, the pledge of resurrection and of life (cf. Rom 8:11). The certainty of future immortality and hope in the promised resurrection cast new light on the mystery of suffering and death, and fill the believer with an extraordinary capacity to trust fully in the plan of God. —John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life*, #67

The Little Sisters of the Poor have cared for the elderly poor of the Archdiocese of New York since 1870. Their Jeanne Jugan Residence is located in the Bronx.

