



CAN SOMEONE WITH DEMENTIA receive the sacraments?

Dear Father Kerper: I recently visited my parents who live in New Hampshire. My father has dementia and it seems to be progressing more quickly this year. My father still goes to Mass everyday with my mother. She told me he hasn't mentioned going to confession in several months. He used to go monthly. She's now concerned that the lack of confession may harm him in some way. Should she encourage him to go to confession? Also, sometimes he seems confused when receiving Holy Communion. Should he stop receiving?

Thanks so much for raising these two questions, which have become very common. Your father is indeed very fortunate to have a loving wife – your mother – as his spiritual guardian.

In cases like your father's, the old maxim, "Do no harm," derived from the ancient Hippocratic Oath, certainly applies.

When a faithful Catholic like your father suddenly stops going to confession one should not presume malice or loss of faith. Since he seems to have dementia, his experience of time has probably changed, thereby causing him to lose track of his confessions.

What does one do?

As a priest, I have occasionally seen spouses attempt to force their mates to go to confession, even to the point of dragging them to the confessional and "coaching" them as to stating their sins.

This happens when one spouse fears that the other is currently in mortal sin or has not properly confessed in the past. Such well-intentioned coercion can gravely harm the person suffering from dementia. For example, it may cause anxiety about forgotten sins, doubts about the validity of sacramental absolution, and even total despair.

While respecting your father's freedom to confess or not, we must also recognize the enormous spiritual value of the sacrament of penance, even when a person can no longer make a clear and well-ordered confession. After all, the sacrament is primarily an experience of God's generous forgiveness, not a legal proceeding that requires mental agility.

Ordinarily people must confess their sins in a clear fashion. However, those who lack intelligible speech, suffer memory loss, or face imminent death can still receive

sacramental absolution from a priest without actually stating their sins.

The Rite of Penance, for example, succinctly states that a "generic" confession suffices when nothing more is possible. This can be as brief as the prayer, "God, have mercy."

But how can this be enough? Because a person's faltering memory or inability to confess sin cannot block God's mercy! Rather, the Lord "reads the heart" of a sinner and bestows forgiveness.

Any priest, then, acting as Christ's agent, can absolve the sins, even mortal ones, of unconscious persons on the verge of death. This, of course, presumes that a person at some point in life had been truly sorry for his or her sins. Such sorrow, even in its most vague form, is absolutely necessary. However, only the Lord knows for sure.

THE CONTINUING VALUE OF PENANCE

As to your father's situation, confession still has enormous spiritual value, though not strictly required. Please remember that the sacrament of penance conveys forgiveness and the gradual healing of the consequences of sin through sacramental grace.

In the case of many older people, the Sacrament heals the soul through clear and tangible reaffirmations of God's forgiveness. Moreover, the practice of confession, even in the most brief and generic form, fosters humility and allows a person to express to a priest sincere sorrow for grave sins of the past.

In light of these spiritual benefits, we should never minimize the benefits of confession, even for people who perhaps have never committed a mortal sin. Contrary to what some older people say, going to confession with only slight sins does not "waste the priest's time." Rather, hearing such confessions is an important part of the priestly ministry. Indeed, in many cases, such confessions edify the priest through the unintended display of humble and durable faith.

Faithful people like your father should feel free to go to confession and those who care for him should make that possible.

Now and then some forms of severe mental illness make confession virtually impossible. For example, when people become delusional, develop multiple personalities, or become excessively scrupulous, it makes no sense to attempt a standard confession. However, such people can still receive absolution.

RECEIVING HOLY COMMUNION

As to Holy Communion, the Church acts most generously by having two minimal requirements, which apply to every baptized Catholic from the age of reason (about seven years old) to death.

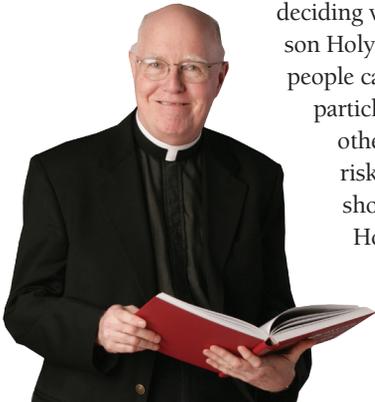
First, the person must be able to distinguish the consecrated Eucharistic elements from ordinary bread and wine.

Based on my personal experience of dealing with severely impaired people, I marvel at how the capacity to recognize the Blessed Sacrament seems to endure even when everything else vanishes. I have seen very sick and agitated people become calm and devout when shown the Host. Though they may say nothing, the expressions on their faces mysteriously attest to their faith and conscious desire to receive the Lord. Who would deny them?

Second, a person must be in the state of grace, which means free of grave sin, ordinarily through the sacrament of penance. This should be presumed to be the case.

Even when the two essential requirements have been met, we still must use prudence in deciding whether to give a seriously ill person Holy Communion. For example, some people cannot safely consume even a small particle of the Host. Or contact with another person, such as the priest, may risk infection. In such cases, no one should ever pressure people to receive Holy Communion.

I hope my response will help you and your mother to find peace and joy as you offer your father the spiritual care he surely desires and deserves. God has blessed him through you. ■



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