

Guidelines for Catholic Ministry in Hospitals

(Please note, these are general guidelines only – individual Trusts and chaplaincy teams will have local regulations which must be adhered to.)

Introduction

Ministry in hospitals varies a great deal across the diocese. However, just about every hospital has a team of people who take communion to those who can't get to Mass. Here are some guidelines to help with this.

Preparation:

If you are collecting the Eucharist from Sunday Mass, make sure you have everything with you, including any volunteer uniform you may have, your parking pass, and any prayer aids (eg prayer book, rosary beads, holding cross). If you take a newsletter with you, you can use this Sunday's readings in your prayer with patients.

Prayerful preparation is essential as always, and part of your prayer at Mass could be for the people you are going to visit and for the staff at the hospital.

If you are taking hosts from a Eucharistic celebration,

- come to the altar when the priest calls you before/after communion
- receive the pyx prepared, place into the pouch, after a prayer/missioning
- leave the church or return to your place as is local custom
- go directly to the hospital

If you are taking hosts from the tabernacle outside Mass

- have a moment of prayer before the tabernacle
- put the required number of hosts into the pyx, and leave the church
- go directly to the hospital

Communion in a hospital setting:

- on your journey to the hospital be reflective
- sign in at the reception/chaplaincy office according to hospital rules
- wash and gel your hands/roll your sleeves up as per the regulations
- on reaching the ward introduce yourself to the ward sister
- do not ever draw back a closed curtain
- introduce yourself to the person/people/ waiting for communion
- the form of prayer will follow local custom, but should include:
 - a prayer of forgiveness – a penitential rite
 - some Scripture reading(s) - those of the Sunday/weekday if appropriate
 - a thought from the homily at Mass
 - a time for intercessions
 - the Our Father
 - the distribution of Communion - also to family or visitors if appropriate
 - a time of silent thanksgiving
 - a prayer after communion
- then you can chat and share parish news and also, if time and the numbers of visits allow, talk about what those scriptures meant, how the person is feeling about their faith, and if there anything else they need from their community.

Alternatives to communion

Some people may not wish to receive communion, but may be very happy to be prayed with. The Our Father or 23rd psalm are lovely prayers to say together. Alternatively, you could say a decade of the rosary together. Or someone may just wish to hold a holding cross and pray silently. The CTS Hospital Prayer Book has good ideas for prayers.

Referring people to the priest

Some people may wish to be visited by the priest chaplain and receive the sacrament of the sick (anointing) or reconciliation. Each team have their own way of doing this, which may involve letting the hospital chaplaincy team know, or contacting the priest directly.

Commonly asked questions:

What to do if you have hosts left at the end of your visit?

If you live close to the church you can put the extra hosts back in the tabernacle. Alternatively, consume the remaining hosts with the last communion that you give. Please don't keep the hosts at home or in your bag.

What should I do if the host gets dropped or damaged?

Hosts that cannot be consumed should be wrapped in a napkin and then buried reverently in the ground.

Who can I talk to about my hospital ministry?

It's really important to remember that people's medical condition is private to them and should not be discussed outside of the hospital setting. At the same time, hospital ministry can be distressing, so do make sure you look after yourself in this situation, and talk things over either with the priest chaplain, a local priest, or the lead chaplain at the hospital. If you feel that you can't talk to them, or if you have a complaint, you can also contact Avril Baigent at the Pastoral Ministry Office, address below.

Do I have to keep the hospital rules about handwashing etc, if I'm only popping in to take communion?

As Catholic priests/volunteers we must abide by our own regulations, but also by those of the NHS. It is really important that you follow the local rules on hygiene, confidentiality and any other matters, or you may have a complaint made against you.

What should I do if people are hostile?

Being in hospital can be a very stressful and scary experience. Whilst people often welcome the opportunity for prayer and communion, this is not always the case. There is a fine line in public perception between offering prayer and proselytising. Our experienced volunteers know how to walk this line without causing offence, and if you are unsure about this, or are new in post, it's a good idea to shadow a long standing member of your team to pick up some tips. In general terms, before you offer prayer:

- Introduce yourself and say that you're part of the Catholic chaplaincy team.
- Ask after the person, how they feel today.
- At this point you will usually know if the person wants to talk to you or not. If they are interested, you can ask if they would like prayer, and if they are of any particular religion. If they're not interested, and don't want to chat, you can excuse yourself and move on.

Final Thoughts

Hospital chaplaincy is one of the corporal works of mercy of the Church. In a very real way, you are doing Jesus' work with people who are at a low point. Thank you for all that you do on behalf of the parish and the diocese. If you have any thoughts about how these guidelines can be made more useful, get in touch via the contacts below.