



## The Blessing of Hands

Paul Kselman

example, during the annual Nursing Week, but other suitable occasions may certainly be chosen. In long-term care, this service can take on even more meaning when the residents of the facility themselves participate in the ceremony. The chaplain may want to **begin with a hymn**: "Amazing Grace," "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," "There is a Balm in Gilead," or any other suitable hymn, **followed by a brief Scripture passage**—perhaps one describing Jesus' healing touch: for example, the leper in Mark 1:40-45, or the crippled woman in Luke 13:10-13. This may be followed by a prayer of **blessing over the oil** to be used for anointing the hands.

In the service, the nurses and caregivers approach a place where one (or a small group) of the residents gently **anoints the palms of the nurses' hands** with a small amount of scented oil, while the chaplain prays a short formulaic or spontaneous blessing. It is significant that the residents do this anointing themselves, since they are the ones who receive direct care from the hands of the nurses.

One question arises regarding who should be included in the service to receive the anointing and blessing. This will vary in different facilities. It should definitely include not only RNs, but LPNs and CNAs as well. It would be up to the chaplain and the nursing staff to decide whether or not to include other caregivers, such as physicians, activity personnel, administrative and office workers, or any others who may be considered caregivers. Even secretaries and receptionists use their hands in their work, as do cooking, housekeeping, laundry, and maintenance staff members. To offer the blessing only to nurses has the benefit of honoring their particular ministry in a special way. To include other caregivers celebrates the many diverse gifts staff members bring to long-term care. These issues should be decided in the planning stage by chaplains, nursing staff, and administration.

Another important issue is that this ceremony must undoubtedly be *optional*, never mandatory. The religious and cultural background of every nurse and caregiver must be respected. It should be inclusive—an ecumenical and interfaith service—not limited to one single denomination or faith tradition.

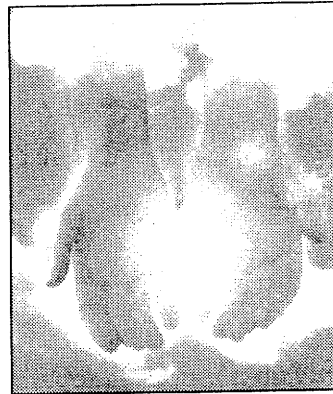
One of the details that would need to be dealt with is the availability of the nurses during their shifts. It may not be possible to have all of the nurses on a unit present for the entire service. One solution to this problem may be to allow some of the nurses to participate in the ceremony, and then return to the unit to give other nurses the opportunity to receive the anointing and

blessing. Although the rite may include a hymn, scripture, and prayer, nurses coming later during the service may not be able to participate in the entire ritual introducing and surrounding the blessing, but would still be able to be anointed and receive the blessing of hands. Also, evening and night shifts should not be neglected, so it may be necessary to schedule the service at a few different times—per-

haps morning, afternoon, and early evening. This would also allow more residents to participate in the anointing.

This type of service in a long-term care facility, with the residents themselves participating in the anointing, can have a profound effect upon nurses and caregivers. This ceremony affirms them in their ministry and offers them the support and encouragement of the very persons for whom they care. Blessing the tender loving hands of nurses and caregivers has a "sacramental" significance for all who participate. It is an encounter with a loving God who heals and blesses us in our life and ministry.

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These reflections are based on several experiences of the "blessing of hands" in hospitals and nursing homes in Illinois. Most recently, the ceremony was celebrated for the nursing staff at the Provena Geneva Care Center—a long-term facility specializing in Alzheimer's care—in Geneva, Illinois.

One of the most moving and impressive ceremonies in any health care facility is the "blessing of hands" of nurses and caregivers. It is especially appropriate, for