

BOOK Review

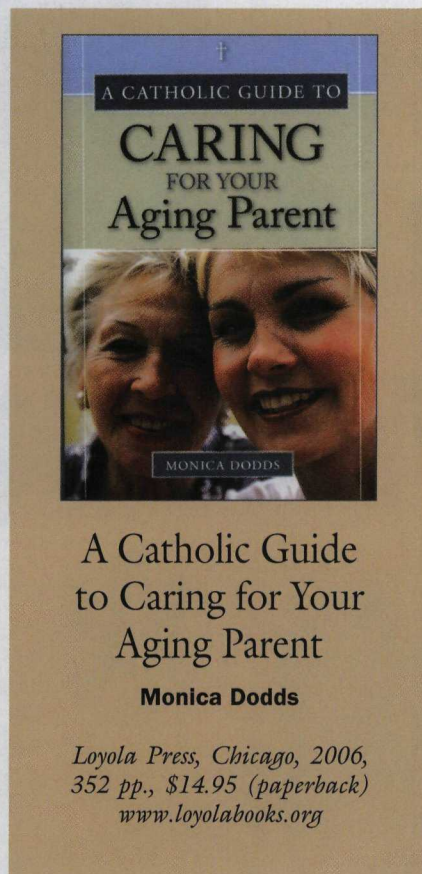
Any adult child caring for an aging parent has a gold mine of information in *A Catholic Guide to Caring for Your Aging Parent*. Author Monica Dodds has done a superb job of examining the role of the adult child caregiver from the moment of realization that one's parents are aging through the planning of a Catholic burial. She does so as someone whose life is centered in Catholic spirituality.

Caregiving is viewed not as a painful, or at best an undesirable task, but as an opportunity to use God's grace to grow as a spiritual person and to use the caregiving years as a time to become closer physically and spiritually to one's parents. This time allows the caregiver to help the parent live his last years to the fullest as he or she prepares for eternal life.

Dodds strives to convince the caregiving reader that these years are to be looked upon as a blessing, not a burden. And she truly provides enough guidance and helpful advice. The table of contents is extensive and serves as a guide for the busy and/or stressed caregiver seeking advice about specific caregiving situations. This is supplemented by a comprehensive index and almost 100 pages of appendices.

Part one provides an extensive and practical collection of caregiving resources. The second section contains evaluation tools including assessment guides, checklists and reminders. Dodds has included evaluative checklists for caregiver stress, home safety, driving skills, assisted living facilities and nursing homes. Also included is a collection of Catholic prayers and devotions which, the author admits, may be more meaningful to the parent than to the adult child caregiver.

Throughout the book, the author reminds readers of one important premise: "the most powerful support I have is an awareness of the presence of God as I go about my daily care giving tasks." She sees the spirituality of care-



giving as fundamental and is aware of God's love for the person for whom she cares. She is aware as well of God's gratitude for the task she is performing. She explains that the caregiver and parent are involved in a sacred journey, which is a once-in-a-lifetime experience — a walking to God that can never be duplicated or repeated.

Dodds, who believes she has been chosen by God to be a caregiver, has written her book:

- to provide practical information for caregivers.
- to share support offered by the Catholic Church for caregivers.
- to highlight the role of spirituality in the caregiving experience.

She has succeeded in all three goals and has supplemented them by adding a prayer at the end of each section "to help you reflect on your care giving experience." She explains that prayer is turning to the One who created your parent and loves him or her even more than you do. She tries to remind you to ask for help, comfort and strength in your caregiving role.

It is here that I question the author's presentation. Many of her readers may find these prayers helpful. However, for many other caregivers, they may be a stumbling block. As someone who works with caregivers of many denominations and some with no religious affiliation, I fear the author's work could easily be overlooked by caregivers whose spirituality is not steeped in Catholic tradition but who could benefit from her experience and wisdom. This book, while it will reach and appeal to her chosen audience, will be lost to the thousands of caregivers outside the Catholic Church to whom her advice would be so helpful.

For those who are Catholic though, Dodds argues that, although the church has improved its stance on addressing the needs of seniors, it has not adequately addressed the needs of family caregivers. She challenges her readers to be trailblazers in their parishes as they raise consciousness of the need to support caregivers.

As spiritual and positive as her approach is, the author does not sugar coat the problems of daily caregiving. She treats very adequately the gamut of emotions and pitfalls that are unleashed by caregiving responsibilities. Dodds emphasizes the need to seek respite and outside help to deal with the guilt and exhaustion that often become by-products of caregiving. These problems are real and legitimate. Denying them is of no benefit to the caregiver or the care recipient. The more the caregiver cares

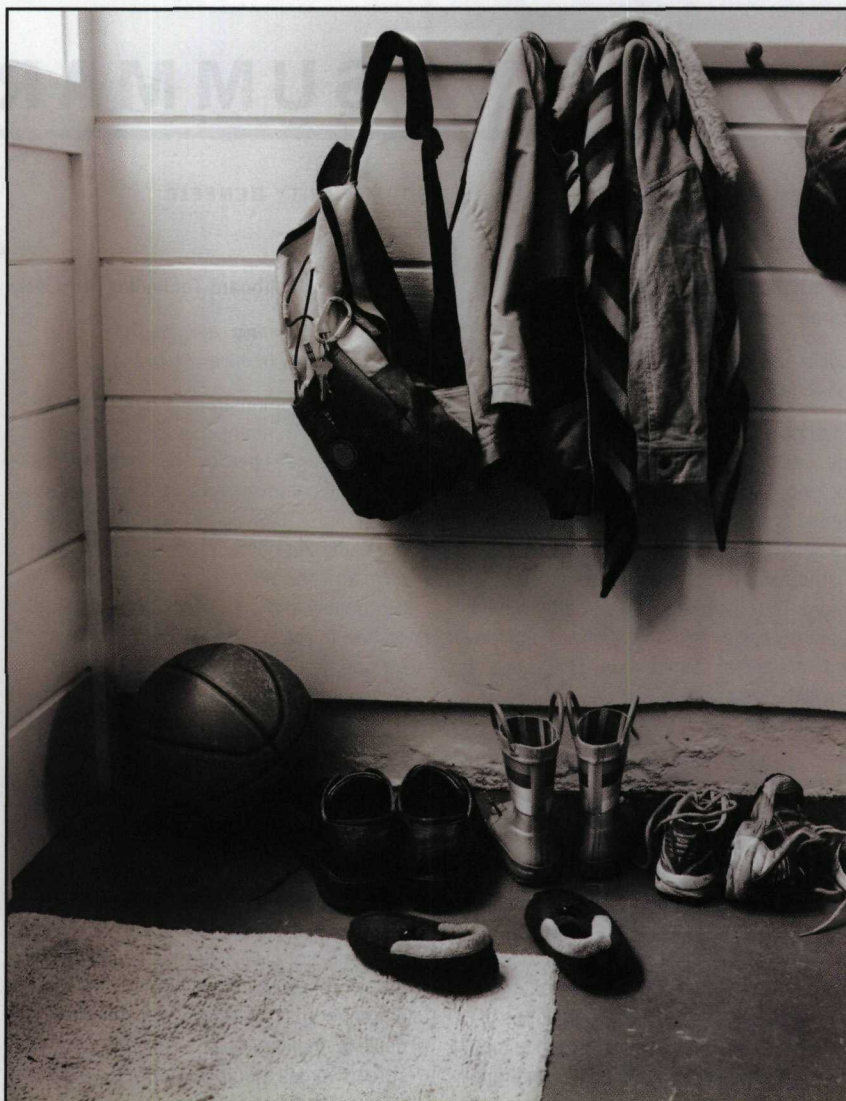
for herself, the better caregiver she will become. The author suggests that caregivers periodically consult the tips and stresses listed in an appendix so that problems do not build unnoticed.

She also helps the adult child to understand how the various losses experienced by our parents accumulate and devastate. Parents need to be allowed to grieve these losses with the support of their children. Dodds notes that communication is a critical skill for caregivers. The adult child must be able to express ideas clearly but with compassion and respect. This becomes even more difficult as physical losses become more prevalent. When verbal communication is no longer possible, touch may need to become the preferred form of communication.

Dodds summarizes her thoughts about caregiving in "A Prayer for a Greater Awareness of the Presence of God." It concludes:

"Change my attitude from tired, frustrated, and angry to loving and compassionate. Remain my constant companion as I face the challenges of caregiving, and when my job is through and it's time for me to let go, help me remember that my parent is leaving my loving arms to enter your eternal embrace."

Sr. Kathleen Weber, CSC
Holy Cross Caregiver Resource Center
Holy Cross Hospital
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