

Just before we die, the most important sacrament we Catholics can receive is communion. Many people think that when a Catholic is dying, the most important thing is for a priest to come and anoint. There are a variety of “last rites” in the Catholic Church. Anointing is one of them, but it is better to anoint the sick when they still have some hope of recovery. The most important sacrament to receive before we die is communion, so it is best to request it when the dying person can still swallow and is alert enough to respond to the prayers. If a priest is not available, any communion minister can go. The special form of communion offered to the dying is called viaticum, a word that means food for the journey. A priest will want to come with communion, but if you have a hard time tracking down one of us, call one of our communion ministers.

Of course, not everyone has the luxury of knowing when death will come. Today’s readings deal with an untimely death. In the gospel we meet a man who thought he had it made and was ready to enjoy all the riches he owned for the rest of his days. He died that night. The first reading has the Teacher saying, “All things are vanity.” Those who labor under the sun gain no real profit. Their days are filled with sorrow and grief. How do we respond in the face of such uncertainty? In the psalm there is a prayer about the precious gift of life: It goes like this: “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain wisdom of heart.” If we knew how many days we had left, we’d have a better perspective on how we should live them.

This is one blessing that comes with a bad sickness. If you know that your days are numbered, that will focus your attention. You begin to learn what is important and what is not. Most of us, if we knew we were going to die soon, would want an opportunity to say thank you and goodbye to the people we love. We might want to arrange the distribution of our possessions. We might say some things we never had the courage to say. And we might want to receive communion one final time.

Other people die when they are not expecting it, like the man in the gospel. They have no chance to say what is most on their heart. Either situation could happen to any of us, so the prayer in the psalm is a good one to remember: “Teach us to number our days aright.” If we knew the end was near, we’d probably live differently. What we can do is live each day as if it were our last. We can say the things that need to be said, and do the things that God would have us do. That will show wisdom of heart.