

Blueprint for Obtaining Last Rites in the Hospital for COVID-19 Patients

Following the direction of my pastor, I am documenting our family's successful struggle overcoming a hospital's refusal to allow my mother, a confirmed COVID-19 patient, to receive Last Rites from a priest. My pastor felt it was important to share this story in case there are other Catholics in this position who may benefit from the path we have taken. I am writing this anonymously without any identifiable information so that it may be shared as widely as possible on social media without any concerns.

On March 29, 2020, my 78-year-old lifelong Catholic mother received Last Rites from a priest while she was a confirmed COVID-19 patient at an Intensive Care Unit (ICU) at a semi-rural hospital run by a private regional health system in Georgia. For two days, my mother's request for Last Rites was repeated to hospital staff by her immediate family with no success. On day three, after consultation with an attorney who helped us with the wording and the strategy, we made the request again with more firmness and clarity. The following is a blueprint of what worked in our case.

At the time this request for Last Rites was made, my father was allowed to be in the ICU area, though isolated away from my mother. While I was on the phone with him, he asked to speak to the nurse supervisor. He then told her that his son on the phone had a question for her. The nurse would not touch the phone for safety sake but allowed my father to place my call on the speaker so that I could ask my question. The careful and calm wording of the request was as follows:

"My name is <name>, I am the <son> of <patient name>. Our family is appreciative of the wonderful medical care and attention that you are showing to my <mother>. My <mother> is a devout Catholic and <she> has clearly expressed to me <her> desire to receive Last Rites from a Catholic priest. My <mother> believes that <her> spiritual life is more important than <her> physical life. This request for Last Rites has been made numerous times to hospital staff, each time being denied. This refusal by the hospital has caused my <mother> and our family extreme emotional distress in what could be <her> final hours. Our family has identified a priest who is willing to administer Last Rites if the hospital would permit him direct physical access to my <mother> and provide him with any necessary personal protective equipment. Our family has been in contact with our attorney and we feel that this request for accommodation is reasonable. If needed, our family, along with our attorney, is willing to hold an emergency meeting with hospital staff to work out any reasonable accommodations or logistics which would help the hospital maintain a safe environment for all concerned."

The nurse supervisor acknowledged that she heard my request. She volunteered that she agreed that the spiritual life is more important than the physical life. She wasn't able to answer our request on the spot, however, she agreed to escalate our request up through the hospital's medical and administrative leadership. In the span of about one hour, our request was approved by an executive committee of the hospital system.

First Things: The first and most important lesson of this story is that if you are reading this and you are free to do so, you need to make a plan to GO TO CONFESSION IMMEDIATELY. You also need to continue to go to confession regularly (St. Francis deSales recommends weekly) and remain in a state of grace. If you are admitted into a hospital for any other reason, such as a car accident, getting Last Rites may be easier, however, for suspected COVID-19 patients, the hospital safety rules will be a different matter entirely. Do not take it for granted that this legal blueprint will work as well in your case.

Finding a Priest: If you or a family member have been admitted to a hospital and you are wanting Last Rites you need to spring into action and build a plan that involves finding a priest who is willing to enter into the hospital room of a confirmed COVID-19 patient. I had called five priests before I found one who was willing. You need to be upfront with the priest and tell him the full truth. You ask him, *“If the hospital agrees to admit you and provide you full protective gear, would you be willing to enter the room of a confirmed COVID-19 patient and administer Last Rites under these conditions?”*

If the hospital approves your request, and you do not already have the priest lined up, you may lose precious time. I recommend seeking out the more traditionally minded priests. If diocesan priests are not willing or not allowed, try order priests. Remember that the priests of the Society of St. Pius X (SSPX) have faculties to hear confessions directly from the pope and not through the local Bishop. If the local chancery will not let diocesan priests participate, those restrictions would not apply to the SSPX. If you find a willing priest, you might consider following up with a financial or spiritual offering according to your means.

Finding an attorney: You may consider finding an attorney to advise you through the process. The time period you are operating in may not allow for formal demand letters or lawsuits, however, having the hospital know that you are engaged with an attorney may get their attention that you are willing to enforce your rights. Our attorney mentioned that using the term, “extreme emotional distress” should place them on notice that a lawsuit could be forthcoming if the rights of the patient are not respected.

Remain calm: Try not to become threatening or angry. Keep in mind that these people are doing wonderful life saving work and their denials are coming from a concern for safety and probably not spite. Show your appreciation. Appeal to their charity and pity. This request may ruffle some feathers. Be prepared for some blowback. In my case, the priest was allowed in, but I was denied, and I have been unable to see my own mother. This was hard for me to accept, but I would gladly make this trade any day of the week.

Find prayer warriors: We are Catholics and Catholics should have prayer groups. Reach out to them all and ask people to pray for this cause. Reach out to homeschool communities, pro-life communities, and parish communities. We had four Carmelite monasteries and hundreds of individual Catholics who were praying for this one intention of my mother receiving Last Rites.

Trust in God's Providence: If you are successful or not, do not be discouraged. We do not know the state of a person's soul or the extent of God's mercy. We may not know how long it has been since their last confession, or if they had a good confession. Do what you can, and then pray. Tell your loved one, to offer their suffering to Christ in reparation for their sins and the sins of the world. Their suffering will be redemptive. In addition to the remission of sin, one of the graces that comes with anointing with oil is the quieting of fear, and the illumination of the soul with pious and holy joy, enabling us to await with cheerfulness the coming of the Lord. These Last Rites are worth every bit of your effort.

Please pray for my mother who at this hour is fighting for her life.