This book is dedicated to the many patients, family members, and caregivers, including nurses, physicians, chaplains, firefighters, and police officers, who so generously shared their beliefs and experiences in the hope of clarifying the importance of spirituality in nursing. Some have crossed over to a new life; others continue to live courageously, finding meaning and hope in the experience of illness or in ministering to those who are ill. Their words, quoted extensively in the following pages, are their legacy. I am privileged to be the storyteller.
God called to Moses out of the bush: . . .

“Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

Exodus 3:4–5

The nurse’s smile warmly embraces the cancer patient arriving for chemotherapy treatment. This is holy ground.

Thenurse watches solicitously over the pre-op child who tearfully whispers, “I’m scared.” This is holy ground.

Thenurse gently diffuses the anxieties of the ventilator-dependent patient in the ICU. This is holy ground.

Thenurse lovingly sings hymns to the anencephalic infant dying in the nurse’s arms. This is holy ground.

Thenurse slips a comforting arm around the trembling shoulders of the newly bereaved widow. This is holy ground.

Thenurse tenderly takes the hand of the frail elder struggling to accept life in the nursing home. This is holy ground.

The nurse reverently touches and is touched by the patient’s heart, the dwelling place of the living God.

This is spirituality in nursing, this is the ground of the practice of nursing, this is holy ground!
As the third millennium begins, our society is looking more and more to its spiritual traditions and philosophies for understanding, guidance, and comfort. This is witnessed by the fact that the concept of spirituality, encompassing numerous definitions, is being widely explored in such media as books, newsmagazines, and television documentaries. The nursing community, also, has experienced a resurgence of interest in spirituality, especially in relation to the spiritual needs of those who are ill.

The purpose of this book is to explore the relationship between spirituality and the practice of nursing from a number of perspectives, including nursing assessment of patients' spiritual needs, the nurse's role in the provision of spiritual care, the spiritual nature of the nurse-patient relationship, the spiritual history of the nursing profession, and the contemporary interest in spirituality within the nursing profession. The work is undergirded by the author's research in spirituality and nursing over the past two decades. The book's subtitle and theme, "Standing on Holy Ground," which describes the nurse's posture in providing spiritual care, was derived from nursing studies of the spiritual needs of chronically and acutely ill adults and children experiencing the sequelae of such conditions as cancer (including leukemia and lymphoma), cardiovascular disease, diabetes, depression, arthritis, Alzheimer's disease, chronic renal failure, and HIV infection and AIDS. The research included both formal and informal interviewing and observing of patients at home as well as in the hospital setting. The spiritual needs of fragile patient populations—the poor, the elderly, and ventilator-dependent patients in the intensive care unit—were also explored. Data on the spiritual needs and concerns of patients' family members were obtained through interaction with significant others.

In order to expand the database of patient spiritual needs appropriate to nursing intervention, qualitative interviews were conducted with a cadre of contemporary nurses from a variety of clinical backgrounds, including medical-surgical nursing, perioperative nursing, critical care nursing, emergency nursing, community health nursing, psychiatric-mental health nursing, pediatric nursing, gerontological nursing, and parish nursing; the group included nurse clinicians, nurse educators, nurse administrators, and nurse researchers. In addition to providing data on patient spiritual needs, numerous reports of spiritual care provided by practicing nurses were documented. The data derived from patient, family, and nurse interviews are
supplemented by materials excerpted from the author’s journal maintained both during the research and while serving as a chaplain intern in a research-oriented medical center. Pseudonyms are used in all instances where naming of study respondents is warranted.

The book presents study findings and implications for care in chapters on nurse–patient interaction, the nurse’s role in spiritual care, the spiritual needs of acute and chronically ill persons, the spiritual needs of ill children and the families of those who are ill, the spiritual needs of the frail older adult, spiritual needs in mass casualty disasters, the spirituality of parish nursing, and spiritual needs in death and bereavement.

In this third edition of Spirituality in Nursing: Standing on Holy Ground, two new chapters have been added, one exploring spiritual well-being and quality of life at the end of life and the other describing an author-developed middle-range theory of spiritual well-being in illness. The former chapter contains empirical data from three studies examining the spiritual and religious concerns of persons at or near the end of life. The latter chapter describes the development of a middle-range theory of spiritual well-being in illness that nurses may use to guide both practice and research with individuals suffering from a variety of acute or chronic illnesses.

Chapter 3, “Nursing Assessment of Spiritual Needs,” contains a number of tools to assess patients’ spiritual beliefs, behaviors, and concerns. The author has included a Spiritual Assessment Scale with established validity and reliability, which can be used by nurses in both practice and research, in addition to qualitative tools constructed for specialized research efforts. Finally, a chapter chronicling a spiritual history of nursing describes the spiritual care activities of selected nursing figures from the pre-Christian and early Christian eras to the present. This chapter is grounded in the nursing and theological literature documenting the historical role of the nurse in the provision of spiritual care.

It is understood that the text of a book dealing with spiritual issues must, to a large degree, be influenced by the personal spiritual and religious élan of the writer. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that the author’s Christian philosophy of life inspired, guided, and supported the writing of Spirituality in Nursing. Although an effort has been made to include examples of patient needs, supported by both data and literature, relative to other religious affiliations, the overall orientation of the work is derived primarily from the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is believed, nonetheless, that nurse readers whose spirituality is guided by another religious ethic will find meaning and inspiration in the poignant nursing examples of spiritual care and compassion as well as in the case examples of patients’ spiritual needs.
# Contents

Preface vii

## 1 Spirituality in Nursing:
Standing on Holy Ground 1

- The Spiritual Ministry of Nursing: A Historical Perspective 2
- Spirituality and Nursing Practice 4
  - Spirituality, 5 • Nursing, 6
- The Nurse’s Spiritual Posture: Standing on Holy Ground 7
- Holistic Nursing: The Body, Mind, and Spirit Connection 8
- The Nurse as Healer 10
  - The Nurse As Wounded Healer, 11
- A Nursing Theology of Caring 12
  - Theology, 13 • Caring, 13
- Dimensions of Caring 4
  - Being, 14 • Listening, 15 • Touching, 16
- References 18

## 2 A Spiritual History of Nursing 21

- Nursing in the Pre-Christian Era 22
  - Egypt, 22 • Greece, 23 • Rome, 24 • Israel, 24
- Christianity and Care of the Sick 25
  - Early Christian Nurses, 25 • Early Monastic Nurses, 27
  - Mental Illness in the Middle Ages, 28 • Medieval Hospital Nursing, 29 • Military Nursing Orders, 30 • Medieval Monastic Nursing, 32
- Post-Reformation Nursing: The Catholic and Protestant Nursing Orders 37
  - Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, 37 • Sisters of Charity, 39 • Sisters of Mercy, 41 • Kaiserswerth Deaconesses, 42 • Nightingale Nurses: Mission to the Crimea, 43 • Sisters of Bon Secours, 46 • Servants for Relief of Incurable Cancer, 47 • Medical Mission Sisters, 48
  - Missionaries of Charity, 49 • Sisters of Life, 50
- References 51
Contents

6 Spiritual Care: The Nurse's Role 129

The Nurse's Role in Spiritual Care 129
Spiritual Care and Religious Tradition 132
- Western Religious Traditions, 132  •  Eastern Religious Traditions, 136
Nursing Theory and Spiritual Care 137
Nursing Intervention: The Practice of Spiritual Care 139
Nursing Intervention in Spiritual Distress 140
- The Problem of Suffering, 141
Spiritual and Religious Resources 145
- Pastoral Care, 145  •  Prayer, 146  •  Scripture, 148  •  Religious Rituals, 149  •  Devotional Articles, 151  •  Sacred Music, 152

References 154

7 Spiritual Needs of the Patient with an Acute Illness 161

The Case of Acute Illness 161
Spiritual Needs in Acute Illness 162
Spiritual Health in Acute Illness 164
Spiritual Needs of the Perioperative Patient 165
Spiritual Needs of the ICU Patient 168
- Spiritual Needs of the Emergency Room Patient, 177
- Spiritual Needs of the Patient in Pain, 180

References 182

8 Spiritual Needs of the Chronically Ill Person 189

The Case of Chronic Illness 190
Spiritual Care of the Chronically Ill Patient 190
Spiritual Needs in Chronic Illness 191
- Hope, 192  •  Trust, 193  •  Courage, 194  •  Faith, 195
- Peace, 195  •  Love, 196
Spiritual Needs of the Cancer Patient 197
Spiritual Needs of the HIV-Infected Person 199
Spiritual Needs of the Chronic Renal Failure Patient 201
Spiritual Care in Bereavement: The Healing Process 325
References 327

13 Parish Nursing: Caregiving within a Faith Community 333
Parish Nursing Defined 333
   The Philosophy of Parish Nursing, 333 • Scope and Standards of Practice, 335
A History of Parish Nursing 336
Contemporary Models of Parish Nursing 338
Parish Nursing Education, 339
The Spirituality of Parish Nursing 340
Parish Nursing Research 343
   The Gift of Faith in Chronic Illness, 344
References 348

14 Spiritual Needs in Mass Casualty Disasters 351
Disaster Nursing 352
   Disaster Services, 354
Psychosocial Impact of Mass Casualty Trauma 356
Spiritual Needs in the Aftermath of a Disaster 359
The Disaster Nurse’s Role in Spiritual Care 361
September 11, 2001: The Terrorist Attack on America: Spiritual Needs and Spiritual Care 363
   The Attack, 363 • The Pentagon, 365 • The World Trade Center, 371
References 385

Epilogue 391
Index 393
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Chapter 2, page 50, quote by John Cardinal O’Connor from the unpublished document The Way of Life, as cited in the Sisters of Life brochure. Used with the permission of John Cardinal O’Connor.


One section of Chapter 3, Nursing Assessment of Spiritual Needs, describing the patient spiritual assessment and care mandated by the Joint Commission for Accreditation of Healthcare Organization (JCAHO), has been reprinted from A Nurse’s Handbook of Spiritual Care: Standing on Holy Ground, p. 15, Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 2004, used with permission of the publisher.

Major sections of Chapter 4, A Middle-Range Theory of Spiritual Well-Being in Illness, have been taken from Chapter 5, Conceptual Models of Parish Nursing Practice: A Middle-Range Theory of Spiritual Well-Being in Illness, in Parish Nursing: Healthcare Ministry within the Church, Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 2003, used with permission of the publisher.
Other Jones and Bartlett Titles by
Mary Elizabeth O'Brien

Prayer in Nursing: The Spirituality of Compassionate Caregiving

Parish Nursing: Healthcare Ministry within the Church

A Nurse's Handbook of Spiritual Care: Standing on Holy Ground