

Why Catholicism is good for your health

In his writings on the Theology of the Body, Pope John Paul II describes the human being as a “unity” of body, mind and spirit. You can’t do something with your body without also involving your soul. But science is teaching us that this also works the other way around – what is good for us spiritually is also good for our physical and emotional health. Four key aspects of our faith – prayer, community, ritual and charity – have been shown to have positive effects that extend beyond the spiritual.

Prayer: Research says that prayer, especially meditative prayer, relaxes the body and helps to prevent disease. One study from Duke University included more than 4,000 people and showed that those who prayed regularly had lower rates of cardiovascular disease. One way in which this may occur has been observed in MRI scans of people engaging in meditation. Brain activity changes and becomes more evenly regulated, and the centers of the brain responsible for pleasure and relaxation become activated. Our Catholic faith has a long-standing tradition of meditative prayer, such as the Rosary and *lectio divina*.

Community: Having the social support that comes with a sense of community helps to buffer our experience of stress. Social support helps decrease the risk of high blood pressure and disease, and helps to prevent depression and other emotional problems. Perhaps this is why numerous research studies have shown that individuals who attend church regularly have healthier immune systems, shorter hospital stays (about one-quarter as long, according to one study) and a lower rate of death from cardiovascular disease and cancer.

Ritual: Our Catholic faith is rich with ritual, both in terms

of liturgical celebrations and the variety of ritual family experiences our faith offers through prayers, blessings and religious holidays. Rituals help us feel connected to something larger than ourselves and help us bond with one another to find meaning in our lives. Research shows that families that have rituals they celebrate together are emotionally healthier and communicate better with one another. Children raised in these families tend to have a more positive self-image, a stronger sense of identity and lower rates of delinquent behaviors.

Charity: Charity toward others is at the heart of our Catholic faith; no other group on earth feeds, educates, houses or provides medical treatment to as many people as the Catholic Church. Works of charity have a positive effect on both our emotional and physical well-being. A recent study showed that older adults engaged in volunteer service were more likely to have stable positive feelings and less likely to experience negative feelings. Young people who volunteer have been shown to have more positive aspirations for the future and are more motivated in school. In addition, people who volunteer their time tend to live longer and have better immune systems than those who do not help others.