

THE TWO SACRAMENTS OF HEALING

1. ANOINTING THE SICK - *healing and raising up*

(The Catechism of the Catholic Church 1499-1532)

Introduction

The sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick and the sacrament of Reconciliation (or Confession) both deal with the issue of health and sickness. The sacrament of Reconciliation is about the health of the soul, which is affected by sin as a body is affected by illness. The sacrament of Reconciliation brings healing to the inner person through the ministry of Christ, the physician of the soul. The sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, on the other hand, deals instead with illness of the physical body - disease, deformity, old age: any condition of the human person which compromises their physical health and significantly restricts their way of life. I say 'significantly' because *all* illnesses compromise my ability to enjoy life: but we are dealing here not with cases such as the common cold or a cut finger (which are short-lived and usually not serious in their effects) but with more serious threats to our overall welfare such as any case involving major surgery, debilitating illness (such as one suffering from the effects of a stroke), worsening health (old age, arthritis) or even conditions which are not usually serious but have become so in a particular case (such as some sufferers in the 'flu outbreak in Jan. 2000 - usually not a serious illness, but in this case it was particularly savage and some lost their lives).

This sacrament gives us the opportunity to face the character of human suffering and to integrate it into our lives of faith in God. Our Christian faith is to be lived out in the details of every day of our lives - this means it has a relevant place in suffering as well as in joy and health. Indeed, you could say that how the faith copes with the experience of suffering and how it understands suffering is the key acid test of our belief. If we can not reconcile faith with suffering (and are led to doubt or to abandon belief in God entirely because of the suffering we experience or hear about in the lives of others) then we have left the cross out of Christianity - not only did Christ accept suffering but he chose to use that human experience as the one by which he would win our salvation. And more than this, he explicitly invites all his disciples throughout the centuries to share in that redemptive act of self-sacrifice:

- *“If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Mt. 16:24)*

He goes even further: this is not an invitation to voluntary sacrifice but a defining characteristic of the follower of Christ. Without being prepared to sacrifice ourselves and suffer while preserving our faith in God, we disqualify ourselves from Christ, from discipleship and from the kingdom:

- *“Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.” (Lk. 14:27)*

Christ does not mince his words: the faith means facing suffering - not just the usual illnesses of human life to which we are all subject, believer and non-believer alike, but in addition, the sufferings which come to us as a direct result of faith in Christ.

- *“Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you, and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely **on my account**. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Mt. 5:11-12)*

He gives us a simple, stark, but bitter teaching to accept: believing and submitting ourselves to Christ means that we will suffer, sometimes more than is asked of others in this life: it does not make us immune from suffering. The sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick helps us to integrate our sufferings in this life into a perspective that *underscores* our faith rather than throwing it into doubt and confusion. It acknowledges the reality of human suffering rather than running away from it, and it recognises the damage it can do to the faith of the believer. It gives human suffering, in all its serious forms, a vital place in the mystery of the Christian life. It addresses the grave injury which we sustain in the life of faith when our physical health is impaired. In short, it takes illness and suffering seriously, and strengthens us when we are at our weakest.

The name of the sacrament has changed in the last generation: this reflects a change in mentality towards the sacrament. In 1950 we would have spoken about *“Extreme Unction”* - the sacrament of Anointing (‘Unction’) that was administered to those who were dying (“in extremis”). The Sacrament was thought of in terms of helping the dying to meet the Saviour in a state of grace - and so was not given to those who were suffering from illnesses which were not at that moment life-threatening. Before we are too critical of the way it used to be done, we should remember that the practice of a previous generation made as much sense to them as the change of practice initiated by the present generation makes to us - we are all subject to the critical judgements of future generations. Nevertheless, the change in name and thinking about the sacrament does permit us to administer the sacrament to those who have the opportunity to recover, thus restoring the emphasis of this Sacrament's nature as a Sacrament of Healing.

- *“(The sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick) is not a sacrament for those only who are at the point of death. Hence, as soon as anyone of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the fitting time for him to receive this sacrament has already arrived.” (C.C.C. 1514, quoting from the Code of Canon Law, canon 1004)*

1. Israel and the problem of suffering

Today, if we fall sick, we regard it as primarily a medical/surgical problem and send for a doctor. It is a matter for science to diagnose, understand and combat. Not so for ancient cultures, nor for Christian societies until the age of the so-called Enlightenment (eighteenth century) which saw the replacement of God with science. For the overwhelming majority of the history of Judaism and Christianity, sickness has been seen as involving more than simply the scientific. St. Paul speaks of the whole of creation being unfinished and subject to futility - incapable of achieving the perfection it longs for. Suffering and alienation, unfulfilled longings in the human person etc., are expressions of the incompleteness of this present creation: the only remedy for the groanings of all creation is the revelation of the new creation, when God lives with mankind in perfect harmony and intimacy. For St. Paul, suffering finds its roots in spiritual, moral imperfection: so it finds its *cure* in spiritual and moral restoration, in the gift of God. Suffering answers only to a grace-solution for it is the consequence of a profound and debilitating lack of grace (see Rom. 8:19-25).

This outlook is embedded deeply in the Old Testament: illness has moral and spiritual roots as well as biological/sanitary/medical etc. For this reason, Moses ordered that all major illnesses were to be reported to the *priests in the temple*. This is not simply because the priests were the closest they had to doctors with any medical skill or anatomical knowledge - it reflects the understanding that more is going on with human illness than the physical bodily symptoms. They saw physical health and spiritual, covenant, health as being interrelated. Illness points to the disharmony in the whole of creation, which is the result of the fall of Adam and Eve: what was created in harmony is now disordered and gives rise to disease, deformity and suffering. The solution therefore was as much theological, spiritual and penitential as it was physical.

In addition, if physical sickness was related to inner, spiritual disorder due to the effects of sin, so too the reverse pairing was made: the healing of bodily illness and restoration of physical strength was seen as related to the achievement of spiritual cleansing, by gift of God. In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses gives his last words of advice to the people of Israel before they enter the Promised Land. He teaches them that there is a direct relationship between the fortunes of the kingdom they are to establish and the manner in which they keep to the Covenant they had made with God: for as long as the people remember the Covenant and submit themselves to it willingly, they will live in the land with all security and peace, but when they turn their backs on the Covenant or simply neglect it, then their prosperity will fail, their security be shattered, their health crumble and they will fall as prey to their enemies.

- *“If you obey my commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, he will give the rain for your land in its season, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. And he will grass in your fields for your cattle, and you shall eat and be full. Take heed lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them, and the anger of the Lord be kindled against you, and he shut up the heavens, so that there be no rain, and the land yield no fruit, and you perish quickly off the good land which the Lord gives you.” (Deut. 11:13-17)*

Today this paralleling of physical health with a man's inner spiritual state might seem bizarre, but only because we no longer think with the perspective of the Sacred Scriptures.

The suffering of the innocent

We need at this point to be careful to avoid being simplistic and accusing the Sacred Scriptures of blandly equating physical health with holiness, and illness with sin - almost as if illness is no more than the physical manifestation of that person's spiritual state. The Book of Job is written and given to us to clarify this.

Job deals with the innocent man who faces devastating sufferings (the death of his entire family in the collapse of the house, the destruction of his farm, the slaughter of his flocks and herds etc.). None of this can he be said to have earned through personal sin, because he is presented to us as an upright and faithful man, devoted to God. His suffering appears arbitrary and certainly unjust. We are forced to face, here, the fact that the distribution of human suffering does not fit the pattern of sin and holiness as we might like: the innocent often suffer while the guilty seem to emerge unscathed. Often, it is the wealthy who escape the worst ravages of disease, earthquake, famine etc. while the poorest are left to suffer because they lack the resources to protect themselves. In the words of Shakespeare:

- *“Plate sin with gold and the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks: arm it in rags and a pigmy's straw does pierce it.” (King Lear)*

In Job's case, and for many others, we cannot simply equate sickness with individual sinfulness. The three “friends” who come to offer Job their advice basically peddle the exaggerated view of the interrelation of physical and spiritual health: if you are ill it must be because you have sinned, even if you are unaware of how. The sick man is the sinner - the healthy and prosperous man is the righteous man. The book of Job especially, but also the Book of Ecclesiastes and a number of the Psalms show that this is not the case. They show how the innocent often suffer alongside the guilty. Nevertheless, these books do not break entirely the relationship between suffering and man's general condition of separation from God - but they do teach us that an individual's personal suffering is not to be identified immediately with his or her personal sin. Indeed Christ himself confirms this when he cures the man born blind:

- *“As he passed by, he saw a man blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him”.” (Jn. 9:1-3)*

Healing as a sign of the coming Messiah

In addition to regarding illness as related in some way to man's spiritual state, the Sacred Scriptures point us to a sign of hope which is inherent in all suffering: the hidden meaning of physical *healing*. When physical ill health is a sign of the incompleteness of creation, then the restoration of health and strength becomes a sign of the forgiving mercy of God. More than this, illness becomes a reminder of the state

of our souls - utterly dependant on God for health. In ancient Israel, illness was often the occasion for a renewal of repentance and conversion to God and the Law he had given to his people. God was not simply involved in the inner, invisible health of Israel but with the whole person: he was seen as the bringer of holistic health, of body as well as spirit. Thus, salvation was often depicted in the language of the mass healing of the sick. Illness became a metaphor for sin that is present in all people, and thus God reveals his universal absolution through the prophets in the language of the restoration of universal bodily health. The coming Messiah, who would restore the harmony between mankind and God would initiate a new age in which there would be no more illness in body or sin in spirit:

- *“Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.’ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy.” (Isaiah 35:4-6)*

The promised deliverer will be accompanied by a period of unlimited restoration: not only will the land be restored to the people of Israel (liberation from foreign powers) but also those suffering from physical and bodily weakness will be given their health and strength. The reign of God with his people will bring total well-being, not simply spiritual liberation.

Suffering as a sign of the Messiah

This was the hardest of all for people to accept. The Scriptures speak of suffering in many ways, and we have seen that in Job especially but also Deuteronomy, the Psalms, Ecclesiastes etc. They confirm what is clear to us: suffering is an evil to be avoided if we are given that chance. BUT, the prophet Isaiah gives us something further: the prospect of voluntary suffering which somehow releases the wider people from their sins - what we call redemptive suffering. This is important for us because it explains much about Christ and the cross - but more than that, it feeds directly into how the faith looks on the suffering that you and I are asked to bear. Isaiah has four so-called *“Songs of the Suffering Servant”* (Is. 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-11, 52:13 - 53:12). The songs describe the chosen one whom God uses to bring justice to the nations (42:4): his work will be seemingly fruitless and in vain but he will be honoured by God and his work rewarded (49:4,6). Then the song becomes explicit - the servant speaks and describes how his work to bring justice has been rejected:

- *“The Lord God has given me a disciple's tongue ... For my part, I made no resistance, neither did I turn away. I offered my back to those who struck me, my cheeks to those who tore at my beard; I did not cover my face against insult and spittle.” (Is. 50:4,5-6)*

To this point, we are only told that this servant of God is sent to bring justice, is seen to fail, is resisted and brings considerable suffering upon himself as the people reject him. What makes the song of the suffering servant so extraordinary is the fourth part which describes his suffering further: he is not just taunted and beaten by his enemies - he is brutally disfigured, pierced, struck down, and slaughtered. This servant is

executed - and the effect of the execution is to release the people in general from the burden of their sins:

- *“See, my servant will prosper, he shall be lifted up, exalted, rise to great heights. As the crowds were appalled on seeing him - so disfigured did he look that he seemed no longer human - so will the crowds be astonished at him, and kings stand speechless before him; for they shall see something never told and witness something never heard before: ‘Who could believe what we have heard, and to whom has the power of the Lord God been revealed?’ ... Without beauty, without majesty we saw him, no looks to attract our eyes; a thing despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering, a man to make people screen their faces; he was despised and we took no account of him. **And yet ours were the sufferings he bore, ours the sorrows he carried. But we, we thought of him as someone punished, struck by God and brought low. Yet he was pierced through for our faults, crushed for our sins. On him lies a punishment that brings us peace, and through his wounds we are healed.** We had all gone astray like sheep, each taking his own way, and the Lord God burdened him with the sins of all of us. Harshly dealt with, he bore it humbly, he never opened his mouth, like a lamb that is led to the slaughter-house, like a sheep that is dumb before its shearers never opening its mouth ... Yes he was torn away from the land of the living; for our faults struck down in death ... The Lord God has been pleased to crush him with suffering. If he offers his life in atonement, he shall see his heirs, he shall have a long life and through him what the Lord God wishes will be done.” (Isaiah 52:13 - 53:10)*

We see here the roots of the saving notion of redemptive suffering: somehow, in a way that is mysterious to us but yet which does make a kind of sense, God uses the suffering of the innocent for the purpose of liberating his children. It is the same idea that lies at the heart of the story of Joseph at the end of the Book of Genesis. He is betrayed by his eleven brothers (the sons of Jacob) and sold into slavery. He ends up accused (falsely) of rape and thrown into prison in Egypt. In the prison he meets the cupbearer of Pharaoh (also in prison) and interprets his dream. Because of this, when the cupbearer is released and Pharaoh is burdened with a recurring nightmare, he informs Pharaoh that a Hebrew slave in prison has the power to interpret dreams. Joseph is taken to Pharaoh, interprets his dream through the power of the Holy Spirit and Pharaoh doesn't just release him from prison but ends up making him regent in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself. Joseph governs wisely because he knows a famine is coming - when the food supplies run out, only Egypt has grain to feed the people and Jacob's sons (Joseph's brothers) come to Egypt to negotiate a sale, unaware he is still alive. The conclusion of the story is the move of all Jacob's family to Egypt where they are protected by Joseph and become very wealthy.

It is the way Joseph *interprets* God's actions in all this which is important: he sees it not as luck or good fortune that he was able to save his family from famine and recover from the way his brothers had betrayed him - this was the action and the very intention of God. When he reassures his brothers that he will not seek vengeance on them for their treatment of him, Joseph says:

- *“Do not be afraid; is it for me to put myself in God's place? **The evil you planned to do to me has by God's design been turned to good, that he might bring about, as indeed he has, the deliverance of a numerous people.**” (Gen. 50:19-20)*

God works within suffering to bring about a greater triumph than would have been possible beforehand. This does not mean that God directly wills suffering, or plots to ensnare us in it just so that he can liberate us from it. But it does mean that God sees human suffering as an opportunity to work an even greater act of salvation through it.

This is the meaning of the suffering servant song: somehow, the voluntary suffering of his servant is the occasion God uses to deliver his people from sin - almost as though the servant carries the punishment for those sins on his own back. Suffering is still a painful and harsh experience, but now God has revealed that it can be the path to even greater life. All this comes to its climax in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ, the suffering servant of whom Isaiah spoke.

2. Jesus Christ - Divine Physician of body and soul

At the very centre of the Faith is the mystery of the cross. Through it, Christ won for us life, salvation, forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is the paradox of Christian suffering: only the cross makes sense of suffering, because only the cross has the power to bring out of pain and suffering something more than was ever possible before. By dying, Christ did not just preserve our lives - he gave us *greater* life, by sharing with us his own divine life. By dying, Christ did not just enter the greatest human trial and emerge triumphant in the resurrection - he gave us the power to share in the same victory, to overcome death through being joined to him in Baptism. St. Peter deliberately harks back to the suffering servant song of Isaiah when he writes about the significance of Christ's passion on the cross:

- *“If, when you do right and suffer for it you take it patiently, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. **He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.** For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.” (1 Pet. 2:20-25)*

It is in the act of sacrificing himself that Christ reverses the effect of sin. Suffering, through the cross, has been turned by God into the means of returning to heaven rather than simply the effect of being separated from him. Even the consequence of rejecting God can be used by him to gain us back again. Suddenly, not just good but *greater* good can flow from suffering than we could have dreamed possible. The cross gives purpose, value and dignity to all human suffering if only we are able to join our sufferings to his and see our own pains as a share in Christ's on the cross. Human suffering becomes co-redemptive when it is offered to God:

- *"By his dying on the cross, Christ shows us how to make sense of our suffering. In his Passion we find the inspiration and strength to turn away from temptation to resentment and grow through pain into new life. Suffering is an invitation to be more like the Son in doing the Father's will. It offers us an opportunity to imitate Christ who died to redeem mankind from sin. Thus the Father has disposed that suffering can enrich the individual and the whole Church." (Pope John Paul II, homily at a service for the Sick during which he administered the Sacrament of the Sick in Southwark Cathedral, Fri. 28 May 1982)*

Christ's mission as Messiah was to restore health in all its forms to humanity - health which mankind had been created with in the Garden but which had been under attack from the moment of the first sin. Spiritually, this 'ill-health' is manifested in sin, but itself is more properly described as the desire within us to put distance between God and us (which leads us to commit specific sins). Physically, this 'ill-health' is manifested in the disharmony that we see in creation: disease, deformity, decay, death etc. Christ comes to liberate mankind from the limitations of earthly life in its incompleteness and separation from the Father. For this reason, Christ is described in the writings of the earliest Fathers of the Church as the *divine physician* – he is the physician of the whole person, body and spirit. Catholic Christianity is not Gnostic in character (which would focus Christ's work solely and exclusively on the realm of the soul and mind), while regarding the body and all things physical and material as evil and created by an evil deity. Christ's work is to bring harmony through the gift of the Holy Spirit to the whole person - and thus the body plays an important part.

For this reason, Christ was actively involved in his lifetime in the healing of the sick. We need to remember *why* he restored their physical, human, fragile health. We are speaking here about a sign Christ gives as to his identity and to the character of the Kingdom of Heaven. Ultimately, the full restoration of humanity, its liberation from ill-health both spiritually and bodily, will come only with the final establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven, when death is overcome in all of us and where sickness is no more. When Christ heals the sick on earth, he is pointing towards this future, visually describing the Kingdom in the bodies of the sick he encounters. The health he gives to them is not the fullness of the Kingdom - otherwise they would never lose this health again: Lazarus would still be alive to this day. Christ gives back to them their earthly physical health (which is a temporary gift - they will lose that health when they grow old, or are exposed to illness etc.) as a way of showing them what he is doing on a more fundamental, and invisible level. Christ is at work restoring the *whole person*, raising up their nature to share in the divine: this will not be fully visible until the Kingdom, when we rejoice together in our glorified bodies which will never know decay or illness. We find this hard to understand, because this life is the only life we know - so to be told that preserving this life is not Christ's primary goal nor should it be ours does place a great step of faith before us. We need to be prepared to lay this life down so as to take up a more glorified and unending life. There is a fundamental attitude shift we are being asked to make here. Human life as we experience it is a good: but what God is offering is not just better but the best. When the Christ asks the Samaritan woman for a drink and she answers in surprise, he comments:

- “If you only knew what God is offering and who it is who is saying to you; ‘Give me a drink’, you would have been the one to ask, and he would have given you living water.” (Jn. 4:10)

In the same way, natural water is a good and necessary thing for human life - but when something infinitely greater is being offered to us, we must be prepared to forego the good in favour of the best. This life is good - but it is not our highest value, and so the time will come that to cling to the good will mean holding off the best: and this is not what is good for us. Ultimately, our hearts seek the eternal, supernatural life of the Kingdom of Heaven: so the unending perpetuation of this, limited, human life is not a goal we would want. Who would choose clean spring water when we could be given water that means we would never thirst, never tire, and never dehydrate? If it comes to a choice between the life which is freed from physical ailments and is bound unalterably to God, and the human life we live here below, subject to disappointments, sickness, depression, confusion, disease and the like, we should have no problem in choosing:

- “Do not fear those who kill the body but can not kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both body and soul in hell.” (Mt. 10:28)

The health that matters is the spiritual health of our relationship with God (which will have a bodily dimension after the resurrection). Thus the physical healing of our earthly body is secondary to that spiritual healing. We can see Christ's own approach to physical illness from any of his healing miracles, but perhaps the most important is the healing of the paralysed man in Mark 2:1-12. There are a number of interesting features about this healing:

1. Our Lord heals the sick man because of the faith he identifies in *the men who carry him* - NOT actually in the man who is healed. This matters - because when we are too sick to come to Christ, it is the community who bring us to him: we are healed not because of the faith we can muster but because of the faith that the Church has in Christ.
2. Our Lord does not immediately address the man's physical ailment - *he speaks about his sins (his spiritual health)*. What matters to Christ at this moment is the deeper ailment afflicting the paralytic, which is his distance from God. This sickness Christ homes in on at once and heals by forgiving his sins.
3. Our Lord heals the man's bodily infirmity not because this is the most important thing he can do but *as a sign that he is able to, and already has, granted him health where he truly needs it - in the soul*. Christ forgives the man's sins, and uses the healing of his body to demonstrate outwardly what he has accomplished inwardly and invisibly.

In this light we need to look at the other healing miracles of Christ. Christ is the only true source of healing, for he deals with the whole person and heals them not in body alone but first in spirit, in the soul, from which flows a secondary healing - in body. Indeed, the very purpose of many of his healings is to point to this truth, and he does so explicitly. When the disciples of St. John the Baptist come to him with their master's question, “Are you the one who is to come or do we have to wait for someone

else?”, Christ gives them their answer in the form of the work he has done, since these speak for who he is and why he has come:

- *“It was just then that he cured many people of diseases and afflictions and of evil spirits, and gave the gift of sight to many who were blind. Then he gave the messengers their answer, ‘Go back and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind see again, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, the Good News is proclaimed to the poor and happy is the man who does not lose faith in me’.” (Lk. 7:21-22)*

Christ's miracles, and especially his healing miracles proclaim his real but hidden identity - the divine physician. They force us to face the question ourselves – *“Who do you say that I am?” (Mt. 16:15)* Without the eyes of faith, the healing miracles of Christ will make us uneasy or even hostile to the Gospel - these miracles proclaim he is the Messiah even if we find that impossible to accept. It is no wonder, then that in the last 200 years or so, there has been a concerted effort to deny the miraculous element on any and all of Christ's healings, for in this way, there is no case to answer! This was true even in Christ's day, and it speaks powerfully of the strength of the statement that his healings made to the people: when he gave sight to the man born blind, the Pharisees were forced either to accept the miracle (and therefore who Christ was) or to deny Christ by denying the healing - so they deny that he was blind from birth and pressure his parents to say that this healed man is not their once-blind son but an impostor (*Jn. 9*), and when Christ performs the greatest sign of his healing identity, when he raises Lazarus, it has such an effect on the Pharisees that they are forced, by their refusal to accept Christ, to extreme measures – *“So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.” (Jn. 12:10-11)*

Jesus restores the physical health of those he encounters as a sign of the greater healing he has come to inaugurate. In this way, *physical healing becomes a sign of heavenly life*: in the heavenly kingdom there is no ailment of body or spirit - so the sign he uses of the breaking through of the kingdom is the granting of heaven-like restoration of health here below. To the eyes of faith, it is clear what Christ is doing - he is fulfilling the prophesy of Isaiah that these healings would accompany the coming of the Messiah. This is why Christ did not make it his total priority to heal all the sick of his day – his primary goal was to achieve the possibility of lasting, primary health (i.e., entry into the Kingdom). Christ is re-focusing our eyes on the greatest priorities by using visible signs. His teaching, however, remains the same:

- *“Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.” (Mt. 6:33)*

Our priority is the Kingdom of Heaven: if this incorporates earthly health, then we are fortunate, but what is of critical importance to us is the primary value we place on eternal life in the Kingdom. With that perspective, human suffering is bearable - for what would we consider too much to give in this life if we truly believed that we were preparing ourselves to inherit eternal life?

- *“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager*

longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it to hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.” (Rom. 8:18-21)

Christ is not subject to this same futility. He stands over the world as its creator as well as in the world as its redeemer. He dispenses healing and health where we would only contract sickness and suffering. In the Law of Moses, those who were sick were cut off from the community so that the sickness should not spread to the others. When the sick met the healthy, it was the sickness that was communicated to the healthy, rather than health communicated to the sick. BUT see what happens in Christ: when he touches the sick not only is he NOT made unclean by touching them but ALSO, they are made clean by the encounter. See the woman with the issue of blood, the leper, the widow of Nain's son. All these episodes would make a man unclean in the eyes of the Law of Moses - but in Christ's case the movement is reversed: instead of the ritual uncleanness passing from the sick to the healthy, we have the spiritual and bodily health of Christ passing from him to the sick, MAKING them healthy. Power flows out of him (Lk. 8:46) that restores broken humanity and raises it up again.

- C.C.C. 1505

3. The Church

Christ, during his own lifetime, sent his disciples out to proclaim the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. They were to preach the good news wherever they went. In addition, they were to proclaim the Messiah - by the same means that Christ proclaimed his presence: Christ gave them power over sickness and evil spirits. This is important for us to realise, because the disciples were more than emissaries of Christ: they were sent as his hands and as his voice. When they spoke and touched, it was Christ who was speaking and touching - so his power flows through them, healing the sick, cleansing the possessed and raising the dead:

- *“He summoned his twelve disciples, and gave them authority over unclean spirits with power to cast them out and to cure all kinds of diseases and sickness” (Mt. 10:1)*
- *“After this, the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to come. And he said to them, ‘Go on your way; behold I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves ... Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you; heal the sick in it and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you’.’ The seventy returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!’ And he said to them, ‘I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven’.” (Lk. 10:1,38-9,17-18)*

This is not magic: it is no more than an extension of the power of Christ: this is his power reaching out to heal and to inaugurate the kingdom. Christ gave his ministry of healing the sick to the Apostles: he commissioned them to exercise HIS power over

sickness, to continue his mission to the suffering throughout the ages as a continuing sign of the victory over human weakness and death which he achieved in his person through the passion and death of the cross *“In my name they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover”* (Mk. 16:17-18). We should look to see in the Acts of the Apostles that there is no pause or delay after the Ascension of our Lord: the Apostles continue healing and raising up the sick as signs of the real presence of the Risen Lord within the Church (cf. the healing of the lame man in the Temple by St. John and St. Peter: when he begs for alms, Peter replies *“I have no silver and gold, but I gave you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk”* at which point the man is helped to his feet and walks - Acts 3:1-10).

The most explicit text concerning the continuation of Christ's healing ministry is found in the Letter of St. James:

- *“Is any among you sick? Let him call for the priests of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven.”* (James 5:14-15)

The primary purpose of this anointing is that the sick person be “saved” and “raised up”: these two effects of the Sacrament are primarily spiritual. Christ, through the anointing priest, reaches out to the sick to bring them the spiritual health in the soul that they need (which being people of faith, they are truly desiring, more than simply a return of bodily health). Note the language:

- *“The prayer of faith will save the sick man”* - Our Lord often tells the sick who come to him for healing *“Go, your faith has saved you”* (Lk. 17:19), or *“Your faith has restored you to health”* (Mt. 9:22): but here, it is the faith not of the sick which brings them healing but ‘the prayer of faith’ - the prayer which the rite signifies, which is prayed by the priest and any who are with him: in other words, the faith of the Church brings the sick to health through the power of Christ which is offered to us in this sacrament. If this seems odd, remember the cure of the paralysed man - it was the faith not of the sick man but of his companions, who brought him to Christ, which persuaded Christ to cure him. It is the same today.
- *“The Lord will raise him up”* - the raising up here is a reference to the day of the resurrection when the Lord will raise up all those who have died in him. However, if it is the will of God and for the good of the community of faith, God may grant a bodily form of healing. I have seen extraordinary forms of physical healing, alas not permanent, in those who have received the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. Their recovery is not a test of their faith in Christ. We can't say that those who experienced some form of recovery are holier or have greater faith than those who did not recover - after all, the repentant thief expresses total faith and contrition on the cross but Our Lord does not heal his bodily wounds or rescue him from the cross - but he does guarantee to ‘save him and raise him up’ with a promise of the resurrection: *“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”* (Lk. 23:43)

- “*If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven*” - Christ reconciles the sick person with the Church and therefore with God. Christ seeks the most profound healing possible for each of us - this will include and certainly need the forgiveness of personal sin. Only when our hearts and minds are fully reconciled to God will bodily health be of any value to us, or of any real use.

What happens in the Rite of the Sacrament of Anointing the Sick?

The people of the parish rarely see this sacrament because it is usually celebrated in the hospital or nursing home. As time goes by, more people are prepared to accept the sacrament before a major operation - and in these cases, the Sacrament is celebrated wherever possible with the community, during the celebration of Mass. Its format is drawn from the practice of Our Lord as recorded in the Scriptures, from a number of his healing miracles: Christ would take oil (or another visible sign, like mud, spittle etc.) and touch the sick person with it - through which he/she would be cured. We use oil, blessed by our bishop during Holy Week, for the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. The precise details of the ritual are carried out in obedience to the instructions of St. James in his Letter. It is celebrated only by those whom St. James points out - the priests of the Church – and follows the structure we find in the Letter:

1. “*Let the priests pray over them*” - the text from the letter of St. James is proclaimed, after which the priest prays for the one about to be anointed. The priest then lays his hands on the head on the one to receive the sacrament. This is the visible expression and sign of praying over someone, symbolically invoking the Holy Spirit, as we lay hands over the gifts of the Mass just before the consecration, and on the head of one who is to be ordained. This action is the ancient symbol of the invocation of the Spirit that goes back at least as far as Christ himself and the apostles.
2. “*anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord*” - the priest anoints the forehead and hands of the one to be anointed, in the form of the cross, saying as he does so the following words: “*Through this holy anointing, may the Lord in his love and mercy help you through the gift of the Holy Spirit*” and then as he anoints the hands “*May the Lord, who frees you from sin, save you and raise you up.*” This second saying is drawn almost word for word from the Letter of St. James (“*the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven.*”)

Why is healing not always granted through this Sacrament?

Christ *always* offers healing to us when we are anointed – Christ offers absolution and forgiveness through the Sacrament whenever it is celebrated so that any malaise in the soul (which is the life which holds the highest value for Christ and thus for us too) may be healed and overcome by God's omnipotent power and everlasting mercy. BUT, this healing may not be the healing we had in mind or had set our sights on. Christ is not like the N.H.S. on tap - he does not pour out his life on the Church for the reversal of every human condition of suffering, and we cannot demand that God grant physical health every time we call for it. Sometimes, it is necessary for us to learn about God and ourselves through the highly uncomfortable medium of suffering.

If we could avoid it, we would - and we would turn down the necessary path of maturing as people and as disciples - the path of voluntary self-sacrifice for love of God and of his Church.

We always need to remember that physical healing is a sign of the more critical restoration of health. Sometimes the lesser is not granted even though the greater is always offered in the Sacrament. It is hard for us to accept that, on occasion, our suffering is an essential ingredient in God's plan of salvation. We need to cultivate within ourselves the same faith in the Father's love that distinguished Christ. While he did pray in the garden of Gethsemane that the chalice of suffering be passed from him, and that the death he was to undergo be something he could avoid, nevertheless he also accepted it, if it be willed by the Father and for the salvation of the world. For us, suffering can be an essential part in our maturing as children of God: the more independent and healthy we are, the more we are prone to think of ourselves as self-sufficient and not needing any help. God may need to bring us to understand our weakness, so that we can turn to him as the source of health and life. While we are convinced that we are simply naturally healthy we will be closing off an important way that God wants us to come to know him. This is the path that St. Paul realised in his extraordinary exclamation "*when I am weak, then I am strong.*" (2 Cor. 12:10) It is only when we are prepared to release some control over our lives to God himself and accept our weakness that God has the opportunity to use us, his servants, for the work he has set aside for us. If that means to witness to him and his merciful providence from the confines of a sick bed or a hospital, this may be the most powerful, effective (and demanding) work of evangelisation that the Lord will ask of us. Anyone who has worked for a while in a hospital or has visited regularly will testify that the sick, who have resolutely maintained their trust in the love of God even despite and during their illness, have made a profound impression on them - greater perhaps than any homily. There we are brought face to face with the mystery of faith, when we witness a true lover of God, who clings more firmly to God in moments of crisis, rather than begins to let go when faith is no longer an easy or rewarding gift to give God. In the last few years of his life, Pope John Paul became an outstanding example of just this kind of courageous and faithful love, a witness given while his strength and health deteriorated. His faith became an inspiration not only for Catholics but for other Christians, for people of other beliefs and for those of none at all.

Those who suffer are living the Passion in their lives: we who share their lives receive a powerful witness in faith: their patience and endurance proclaims a confidence in the redeeming power of Christ's love. They find the crucified Lord in the midst of their sufferings:

- *"Today I make an urgent plea to this nation. Do not neglect your sick and elderly. Do not turn away from the handicapped and the dying. Do not push them to the margins of society. For if you do, you will fail to understand that they represent an important truth. The sick, the elderly, the handicapped and the dying teach us that weakness is a creative part of human living, and that suffering can be embraced with no loss of dignity. Without the presence of these people in your midst you might be tempted to think of health, strength and power as the only important values to be pursued in life. But the wisdom of Christ and the power of Christ are to be seen in the weakness of those who*

share his sufferings.” (Pope John Paul II, homily at a service for the Sick during which he administered the Sacrament of the Sick in Southwark Cathedral, Fri. 28 May 1982)

Sickness is a crisis moment for the human being: a moment of choice. We can choose the path of faith and interpret the sufferings we undergo in the environment of faith in God who chose to experience human suffering in Jesus Christ and who is particularly close to all who suffer - or we can be led into introspection:

- *“Illness can lead to anguish, self-absorption, sometimes even despair and revolt against God. It can also make a person more mature, helping him discern in his life what is not essential so that he can turn toward that which is. Very often illness provokes a search for God and a return to him.” (C.C.C. 1501)*

The Church, and each of its members, is asked to share in the life of Jesus Christ so as to share in his glory - sharing in his life means unavoidably sharing in his suffering:

- *“in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's sufferings for the sake of his Body, that is, the Church.” (2 Cor. 12:9)*

St. Paul makes a critical point here, which helps us to regard our suffering in its true, that is Christ- perspective. The Church (that is, you and I through Baptism) is Christ's visible Body. Our lives are inseparably united to Christ so that we may share the glory that he has now been given in Heaven by his Father. What Christ suffered in his lifetime we are also bound to - not only his glory - and it is through willingly identifying ourselves with Christ rejected and crucified that we are most fundamentally united to him. We are never more Christ-like than when we enter into his passion and death through our own trials on earth, willingly accepted for love of him (as he accepted them for love of his Father and love of us). Our sufferings are those of Christ crucified in this day and age. He is redeeming the world today through the passion he is renewing in his visible Body - you and I.

- *“When we cry ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.” (Rom. 8:15-17)*

This is quite sobering. Suffering is not a voluntary part of the disciples' role: it is an essential element in the whole process of entering more deeply into Christ. Without it, we are choosing only to be configured to a part of Christ (the fun-part - the joyful, glorified, resurrected, powerful Christ) and this means in effect editing the Gospel so that we edit-out the parts that are demanding of ourselves. If we are glad that Christ did not do this (and so avoid the crucifixion) then we must be careful not to do so ourselves - because the price is a high one. We are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, sharers in the divine nature, renewed, forgiven, glorified adopted sons of God BUT on one condition **“provided we share his sufferings”**: this is the only way we can be transformed into the glorified children of God, sharing Christ's resurrected life. SO suffering is not just about bad luck or a hazard of living: it is a requirement of the Gospel and the *sine qua non* of entry into the Kingdom of Heaven.

A Conclusion

Avoiding suffering is usually the wise and sensible thing - but there are occasions when to avoid suffering for oneself is the cause of greater suffering: not only for oneself but for others or for both. The countless hundreds of thousands of martyrs refused to side-step physical suffering, which they could have done simply by renouncing Christ and the faith, because to have done so might have saved them from the pain of dying at that time but would have been the cause of greater and wholly inevitable future suffering of an enduring and worse kind (the scandal to their community, the danger of others leaving the faith in imitation, the risk to their own souls of denying Christ etc.). Suffering is to be avoided - UNLESS in avoiding it we are contradicting the faith, in which case, suffering needs to be accepted for love of him who accepted suffering for love of us. The sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick reminds us of all this. It speaks to us of the need to view suffering as a part of human life that we cannot simply run from but must face in the full light of the faith. Somehow it has a part to play in the redemptive plan that the Father has for the world through the Church in Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit. To suffer in faith for love of God is to conquer the worst of our weaknesses and to share in the greatest triumph which God has won over sin and selfishness: that is the sublime victory of the cross, the redeeming self-sacrifice of the Son which has achieved our liberation and united us to him so that we may share with him the work of redeeming the world through the sufferings we bear for love of him. The sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick is the moment when Christ consecrates that Christ-like gift of suffering, strengthens us to shoulder his cross with him and assures us of his enduring divine presence. It is truly a work of God himself.

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