

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

ANOINTING OF THE SICK

(Catechism nn. 1499-1532)

Suffering

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is a sacrament of healing: healing from the effects of separation from God and separation from the Christian community, a separation that we bring upon ourselves by grave sin. A second sacrament of healing is offered to us when we come up against our personal mortality because of a serious illness. We need special support if we are going to manage suffering in such a way that physical and psychic pain, anxiety and fear do not overwhelm us, and that we do not lose heart, but manage to continue to love as best we can in circumstances that can be particularly difficult. We need the special support of God's grace and of the community's love, and we are offered this in the Sacrament of the Sick. This support can be a significant factor in our healing, but even if it does not do this (for we must all die one day), it can defend us against the kinds of sin that can afflict us when we are feeling low or depressed, and it can support us by reminding us of the fact that God is with us in our pain, that we are not alone, and that no suffering can stop us loving.

Suffering in the life of a disciple of Jesus

Before reflecting more closely on the sacrament, we will pause to examine the place that suffering can play in our lives. It is natural to find suffering hard to accept. If we keep our eyes on Jesus, however, it is possible to glimpse in suffering a meaning that would otherwise evade us. There is the basic human need to develop and to respect the unique person that we are. In one sense this journey never ceases, for we are always discovering depths of mystery in our person that continue to surprise us. This journey of self-discovery and acquiring self-esteem is not always an easy one, but it does have the support of a natural instinct. We experience a natural urge motivating us to become a person who is worthwhile. We desire to be of value in our own eyes and, since we are social beings, we experience the need and the urge to be recognised and respected also by others.

However, we have an even more basic need. The need that is at the very core of being human is to be entirely reliant upon God, the giver and sustainer of our being. The problem is that we do not experience a correspondingly natural urge to rely on God. Even our 'religious experiences' tend to be drawn into and understood in terms of our natural urge to be someone in our own right. So it requires a grace from God that is above and beyond our natural gifts (a 'supernatural' grace) to make us aware of our need for complete dependence on God, and to motivate us to do whatever is needed to attain this transcendent good. Again and again Jesus reminds us:

'If you try to make your life secure you will lose it. If you lose your life you will keep it' (Luke 17:33).

Ultimately we discover ourselves only in God's love, and to enjoy God's love we must transcend our own ego; we must let go of our natural tendency to focus on ourselves; we must learn to love.

It is here that suffering plays its irreplaceable role, for suffering forces us to recognise the basic flaw in our thinking that we are meant to be self-reliant. It forces us to face our dependence, and it invites us to trust, for we cannot reach the goal of our human fulfilment except in dependence upon and communion with God. Without suffering, there is a tendency to stay fixed in a situation that works, that feels comfortable, and in which we feel affirmed.

Suffering threatens this equilibrium, and psychic energy is engaged which drives us to face whatever it is that is causing the suffering and the effects it has upon us, and to listen at every level to what is going on in our psyche as well as in our body.

We may choose simply to hold on, to stay put, and to defend our position. However, when we listen, we hear ourselves being asked to let go, and to allow to die something that has seemed good, and perhaps has in fact been good, and to entrust ourselves to the grace that is being offered us in and through the suffering. We are free to choose to avoid the pain of ‘dying’, or we can cry out in pleading prayer to God on whom we depend, entrust ourselves to God’s grace, courageously endure whatever suffering is involved, and allow ourselves to undergo what feels like a kind of ‘dying’, believing that God will raise us up.

Death is the ultimate situation in which this happens, but all along the road of life there are ‘dyings’: the ordinary psychic stages of maturation; any occasion which requires that we leave someone or something we value; coming up against our own or other people’s limitations which require us to let go our self-image or our image of others and our unrealistic hopes, dreams and expectations. The pain of ‘dying’ can sometimes be in proportion to the success and duration of the adaptation we have made to whatever it is that is being threatened.

To be human means to be finite, to be dependent, to receive all we are and have as a gift. As human beings, we are not immortal. Once life has been given to us as a gift, the only life we ever know comes through dying. The whole process of maturing is one of accepting the ‘dyings’ that the human condition and our own and other people’s sinful decisions inflict upon us. This certainly does not mean submitting inactively to injustice. But it does mean that even when a ‘dying’ is laid on us unjustly, we must come to an acceptance of the reality of the dying if we are to find a deeper life through it.

Each time we accept to ‘die’, we experience a deeper communion with God who loves us through our dying, and who raises us up to a fuller life of deeper intimacy with him. Our fidelity, generosity and courage enable God to keep offering us a fuller life, beyond our experienced horizons. But each acceptance of the offer requires a new dying. This will involve suffering until all roots of resistance to God’s love have been burned (purified) away by God’s Holy Spirit, the living flame of love.

The truths contained in the above have been communicated by God to human beings in every culture and in every generation, for everyone in every situation is graced. However, the lesson is difficult to learn, and God chose that his Word would become flesh in Jesus to show us the pattern. When we contemplate Jesus in his suffering he gives us an example. By sharing his Spirit with us, Jesus encourages and enables us to follow him along the path of letting go, the path of loving through suffering. By keeping our eyes on Jesus, especially on his way of responding to suffering, it is possible for us to glimpse in suffering a meaning that would otherwise evade us. In our weakness and suffering, we experience a strength that is not our own. Saint Paul writes:

Suffering with Jesus

‘The Lord said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.’

Much pain in our world results from our reaction to unjust suffering inflicted on us by others. We tend to hurt back. Or, when we do not do that, we store up the hurt and pass it on to others. In either case, the pain goes on and on. If, however, we can bear suffering in love; if we can continue to offer love (‘offer the other cheek’); if, while working against injustice, and while working to alleviate suffering, we are hated, excluded, reviled and defamed because of Jesus — then indeed we are blessed, for the suffering stops with us. What is more, it exercises an extraordinary power for the conversion of those who cause us the suffering. It can give courage also to those who suffer and who do not know how to bear it.

For the disciple of Jesus there is a profound sense in which suffering can unite us to him. Truly, love is the greatest gift. But if we love the way Jesus loved, it will not be long before suffering enters our lives as it entered his. If, like Jesus, we are to love the outsiders, we, like Jesus, will suffer the lot of the outsider. If, like Jesus, we are going to take the part of the oppressed, we, like Jesus, will suffer the lot of the oppressed. This was Paul’s experience. He wanted to know and live Jesus’ life, even, and perhaps especially, when he experienced suffering.

‘I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me’ (Galatians 2:19-20).

‘May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world’ (Galatians 6:14).

‘If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his’ (Romans 6:5).

‘We are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us’ (Romans 8:17-18).

Perhaps the most wonderful thing about suffering is that, through it, Jesus invites us to join with him in redeeming the world. It is this truth that caused Jesus’ disciples to find joy in their sufferings

‘I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and I am completing what is lacking in my flesh of the afflictions of Christ for the sake of his body, that is, the church’ (Colossians 1:24).

‘Rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed’ (1Peter 4:13).

It seems true that to experience Christ as exalted we have to experience him as crucified. To know the power of God's redeeming love, we need to look upon the one we have pierced (John 19:37). We need to put our hand into his pierced side and our fingers into his wounds (John 20:27) — the wounds of his brothers and sisters with whom, as the Son of Man, he still identifies. The amount of good that is in our world, as a result of suffering that is borne in love, is immeasurable. Both Paul and James consider such suffering a privilege.

'God has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well' (Philippians 1:29).

'My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy' (James 1:2).

There is a mystery here that goes beyond our understanding. But our life-experience will not allow us to ignore it.

Christianity has no answers to the meaninglessness of suffering brought upon ourselves and upon others by our failure to listen to God. It does, however, show us a way to integrate suffering into our lives. At the same time, it is apparent that there is excessive suffering in our world. People are degraded by it, dragged down by it, and have their lives rendered inhuman by it. Christianity lays upon everyone the duty to work against suffering and its causes. Like Jesus, we are to act as instruments of God, bringing healing and liberation to the sufferer. Discernment is necessary, and the causes of suffering need to be named and opposed. But it is not for us to sit in judgment, to look for culprits or to apportion blame. We are to work for just institutions and just structures. But we cannot wait for this to happen. We are called upon to feed the hungry now. We are called, now, to give drink to the thirsty, to visit those in prison and to work to heal the sick:

'I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink ... I was sick and you took care of me' (Matthew 25:35-36).

Finally, we need to remember that death necessarily sets limits to any possibilities we have of alleviating suffering. There can be no solution short of the resurrection.

'In accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home' (2Peter 3:13).

'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death' (Philippians 3:10).

While we strive, in response to God's grace and call, to be God's faithful servants in bringing about the reign of God here on earth, we recognise that our ultimate homeland is in the love-communion with God that we call 'heaven'.

'Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself' (Philippians 3:20-21).

God's Providence

In a future life we are assured of being finally and totally drawn into God's own love-communion, the communion enjoyed by the risen Christ.

'It is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh ... We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence ... So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. 'For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling ... so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life' (2Corinthians 4:6 - 5:4).

When we recognise that, whatever the circumstances, God's will is that we love and be faithful to love; when we recognise that suffering is part of life and that its causes are complex and sometimes quite contrary to God's will, we see our task as accepting the suffering which we are unable to prevent, without letting it deter us from loving faithfully.

When we experience suffering ourselves or experience others suffering, we will not automatically assume that it is God's will. Rather, we will trust that God is present to all who are suffering, loving us to draw closer to God through our suffering, whatever its cause. We may even draw so close to Jesus through suffering that we embrace the opportunity to share with him in revealing God's love in this special way to those for whom Jesus gave his life.

Jesus was willing to lay down his life, not to die but to continue in the intimate life of love that he had with his Father. He laid down his life willingly 'in order to take it up again'(John 10:17), and he is encouraging his disciples to do the same, for he has come not that we might die but that we may 'have life and have it abundantly'(John 10:10). Sharing his life we 'will not die'(John 6:50). 'Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes'(John 5:21). The power that makes possible the victory of life over death is the power of love which, like everything else, he has from the Father (see John 5:26).

We are called to believe that suffering comes within the loving and wise providence of God. We are called to believe that God's will is to heal us and to liberate us from suffering.

Ultimately this will happen when we share glory with God's Son in heaven; but we can experience liberation here on earth when love heals, and when to be healed leads to greater love. If we continue to suffer, let us continue to believe in God's love. Let us keep hoping for God's redemption. Let us remain faithful to loving. Then suffering itself will be experienced as a grace, deepening our love and bringing about our purification and redemption. Suffering is part of every life. Let suffering be a cross for us who are disciples of Jesus, for then we can embrace him who died there, knowing that he is embracing us.

Suffering and the Sacrament of the Sick

The Hebrew Scriptures often link suffering with sin (Catechism n. 1502). It is true that sin produces suffering, but we must take care not to presume that behind all suffering lies sin. We recall the following from John's Gospel (9:1-3):

‘As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.’

Rather than see suffering as divine punishment for sin, we should ask: ‘Where is God in this suffering?’ For God is surely present, loving the sufferer and everyone around him/her. Our place is to be open to God's healing grace, to welcome it into our own suffering, and to mediate it to others. Love heals the psyche, which can affect our physical ailments. It comes as no surprise that God's love incarnate in Jesus brought profound healing to people who welcomed it in faith. Sometimes the psychic healing led to physical healing.

Jesus shared his life and his mission with his disciples. The mission included healing:

‘The Twelve anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them’ (Mark 6:13).
‘These signs will accompany those who believe ... they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover’ (Mark 16:18).

Paul includes healing among the grace-gifts (‘charisms’) of the Spirit:

‘To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good ... To some is given the gift of healing through the Spirit’ (1Corinthians 12:7-9).

The Catechism (n. 1509) writes:

‘The Church has received from the Lord the charge to “Heal the sick”, and strives to carry it out by taking care of the sick as well as by accompanying them with her prayer of intercession. She believes in the life-giving presence of Christ, the physician of souls and bodies. This presence is particularly active through the sacraments, and in an altogether special way through the Eucharist, the bread that gives eternal life.’

The Catechism (n.1510) goes on to speak of the sacrament of the sick:

‘The apostolic Church has its own rite for the sick attested to by St. James: “Is anyone among you sick? Call for the elders (Greek: presbyteroi: ‘presbyters’, ‘priests’) of the church and have them pray over the sick person, anointing with oil in the name of the Lord.

Grace of the Sacrament

The prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him/her up; and if he/she has committed sins they will be forgiven” (James 5:14-15).

The text from James continues:

‘Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective’ (James 5:16).

The whole community suffers when any member is sick. The family and carers especially are also faced with the prospect of death. Jesus’ touch and the anointing of his Spirit is for them as well. At certain periods of Church practice, any Christian could anoint with this oil. Pope Innocent I (416AD) writes:

‘The oil, which is blessed by the Bishop, can be used not only by the priests but by all Christians when they need it for themselves or for those who are dear to them.’

However, the mention of ‘presbyters’ in James’s account, and the link with ‘forgiveness of sin’ led the Council of Florence (1439) to limit the administration of the sacrament to priests. This limit still applies.

In his public ministry, Jesus was attracted to be with those who were suffering, to lay his hands on them, and to comfort them with his love. Now through the sacrament, the risen Jesus stays with the sick person whose condition of sickness is consecrated by the gift of Jesus’ Spirit, symbolised in the healing oil. There is a link here with the anointing received at Baptism. That anointing prepared us to receive Jesus in the Eucharist. The anointing of the sick can bring healing, which restores the sick person to be able to rejoin the assembled community at the Eucharist. At other times it is a preparation for the enjoyment of the heavenly banquet. The Catechism (n. 1520) states:

‘The first grace of the sacrament is one of strengthening, peace and courage to overcome the difficulties that go with the condition of serious illness or the frailty of old age. This grace is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who renews trust and faith in God and strengthens against the temptation to discouragement and anguish in the face of death. This assistance from the Lord by the power of the Spirit is meant to lead the sick person to healing of the soul, but also of the body if such is God’s will. Furthermore, “If he has committed sins, he will be forgiven”’.

The communion with Jesus brought about through the grace of the sacrament unites the sick person to Jesus in his sufferings. By continuing to love through the suffering, the sick person joins Jesus in giving his/her life for the healing of the world.

‘By the grace of the sacrament of anointing the sick person receives the strength and the gift of uniting him/herself more closely to Christ’s passion: in a certain way he/she is consecrated to ... share in the saving work of Jesus’ (Catechism n.1521).

‘The sick who receive this sacrament, by freely uniting themselves to the passion and death of Christ, contribute to the good of the People of God. By celebrating this sacrament the Church, in the communion of saints, intercedes for the benefit of the sick person, who, for his part, through the grace of this sacrament, contributes to the sanctification of the Church and to the good of all people for whom the Church suffers and offers herself through Christ to God the Father’ (Catechism n. 1522).

Some of us remember the sacrament as 'Extreme Unction'. We thought of it as a sacrament given at the point of death. Recent liturgical reform emphasises an earlier tradition. The sacrament is to be offered at the beginning of a serious illness. It is not primarily for those who are at the point of death (though it is never too late to offer it). It is offered to those who contract a serious illness, or whose frailty faces them with the prospect of death. It consecrates them in their condition. Should there be a worsening of their condition, and so a new threat, the sacrament can be repeated (see Catechism n. 1514-1515 and 1528).

The sacraments of Penance, Anointing and Eucharist (Viaticum) are offered to us at the completion of our earthly journey

