

Heal the Sick

We read in the Catechism or our Church, *Christ Our Pascha*: “Sending the twelve apostles to preach the Gospel, Jesus ‘gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness’ (Mt 10:1). He promised that healings would accompany their preaching: ‘They will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover’ (Mk 16:18). Following Christ’s example, the apostles also enjoined prayers for the afflicted: ‘Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven’ (Jas 5:14-15). The Church continues the Apostolic Tradition: it celebrates the Mystery of Holy Anointing for the healing of soul and body, and for the forgiveness of sins.”

Holy Anointing is not the only tradition of the Church concerning healing. In 1 Cor 12:28, some in the Church have the gift of healing. When our Lord spoke of the judgment, He also spoke of taking care of the least (Mt 25), and one of the forms of caring was mentioned: “I was ill and you cared for me.”

In the days of the Lord and the Early Church, illness was a concern of both. In the story (Mk 5) in which a woman touched His cloak and was cured, it is noted that she had been treated unsuccessfully by many physicians. This was more the norm than the exception. When plagues came, one of the first to leave were the physicians. But, the first to arrive were the Christians.

To the Jews and Romans, sickness was more than likely a mark of sin or moral weakness. A person who was sick “deserved it”. Christians, individually or in groups, responded by visiting and caring for the sick.

The first major test for the Christian community was the Plague of 250-270, which in most cases was fatal but in other instances left people crippled, blind or deaf. Cyprian told his Christian brethren to turn their Christian charity to the pagans. Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria wrote, “Most of our brother-Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of the danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains ... The heathens behaved in the very opposite way. At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers

away and fled from their loved ones, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treating the unburied corpses as dirt.” Because of this love shown, many people converted to Christianity because they saw not only the compassion but the joy.

In the East this medical care became institutionalized.

Monasteries, to care for their monks, had trained and volunteer monks on hand to care for the others, but this care was not exclusive. Monasteries were known to have what we would call today, “out-patient clinics.” St Basil the Great wrote in his *Long Rules*, “The medical art was given to us by God to relieve the sick.

Basil was aware then, as we are now, that the work of physicians is not guaranteed to cure. So concerning physicians, he writes, “we should neither repudiate this art altogether nor does it behoove us to repose all our confidence in it; but, just as in practicing the art of agriculture we pray God for the fruit, and just as we entrust the helm to the pilot in the art of navigation, but implore God that we may end our voyage unharmed by the perils of the sea, so also, when reason allows, we call in the doctor, but we do not leave off hoping in God.” Prayer has an essential element of healing, as St Athanasius noted about St. Antony of Egypt: “frequently the Lord heard the prayers he offered on behalf of many people. And Antony was neither boastful when he was heeded, nor disgruntled when he was not; rather, he gave thanks to the Lord always. He encouraged those who suffered to have patience and to know that healing belonged neither to him nor to men at all, but only to God Who acts whenever He wishes and for whomever He wills.” The monastic approach to health care brought together spiritual and medical treatments. The chance of miraculous cure did not stop the monks from learning and applying medical remedies, and the availability of medical remedies did not deter them from praying for divine healing.

Part of the reason that St Basil is called “the Great” is because following his installation as Bishop of Caesarea in 370, he created a network of buildings called *Basileiados*, “a new city.” As part of this complex there were doctors and nurses who treated the sick and provided what we would now call nursing home and hospice care. This project was funded through the generosity of the wealthy who St Basil encouraged to invest their money in the heavenly treasury and not in earthly pleasures.

So following this Eastern tradition, we too should be involved both individually and collectively in healing and visiting the sick or at least in investing in the heavenly treasury.

Fr Jonathan Morse

February Is (Still) “Catholic Press Month”

As the United States was forming, nativism, or opposition to immigration, was strong. This lack of social standing placed pressure on immigrants and created a need to unite and educate, to bring news

from home, and to fight for civil and religious rights in a new country. The immigrants accomplished this by forming societies and associations; creating Catholic journals and newspapers.

Bishop John England, an experienced editor who emigrated from Ireland, initially used the secular press to explain Catholicism but soon realized that he needed his own vehicle to address misrep-

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