

Anointing of Sick speaks to unity of body and soul

FAITH SHARING

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About 10 years ago, I was traveling in southern Germany. One of my visits was to an "apothecary museum," housed in an old castle. To my delight and surprise, one of the exhibits featured a portrait of Christ depicted as a pharmacist.

Such images began to be popular in Germany during the Sixteenth Century. In such portraits, Jesus dispenses healing through the "medicine" of the virtues. Though not as prevalent as portraits of Christ as physician, both types of portrayal are significant in that they assert the care Jesus shows, not only for the soul, but also for the body. Indeed, the healing of the one is often intimately tied with the healing of the other.

We can see this clearly, not only in ancient paintings, but also in the Gospels themselves.

Consider, for example, a story recounted by three of the four Gospel writers, the passage often referred to as the "healing of the paralytic."

In each of the three versions, a similar scene is set: a paralyzed man convinces his friends to carry him into the presence of Jesus. However, this is not an easy task. Both St. Mark's and St. Luke's gospels mention that the crowds around Christ were so thick that the friends eventually

cut a hole in a roof and lowered the paralyzed man down through the rafters to lay him at Jesus' feet.

Seeing their effort, Christ says, "Child, your sins are forgiven."

When the scribes in the crowd begin to protest in their hearts that this is blasphemy, and that only God can forgive sins, Christ responds with a simple question: Is it easier to say your sins are forgiven, or to say to a paralytic, get up and walk?

Before the scribes can answer, however, Christ affirms that he has authority to speak to both the spiritual and the physical condition of ailing humanity. He instructs the paralyzed man to rise, pick up the mat on which he had been carried, and walk by himself.

The next instant, to the astonishment of the scribes and to the glory of God, the man rose and walked.

Perhaps we too are astonished. As participants in the modern world, many of us have the habit of considering the relationship of body and soul in one of two ways, either of which might make it difficult to hear this account from the Gospels without a bit of confusion.

First of all, some of us may be most comfortable with the assertion that there is no connection between the body and the soul whatsoever. In this view, it is the job of the Church only to minister to

the latter, and the former is of no consequence. Often, this translates into a desire to denigrate the importance of our bodies, and we come to think of them as "mere vessels" in which the real part of us, the soul part, is contained. In other words, the body is "disposable."

A variant of this first manner of thinking leads those who strictly separate the soul and body to use this separation as an excuse to tell the Church to stay out of worldly affairs like politics or cultural disputes. After all, if the only legitimate concern of the Church is the soul, then it follows that the Church has no authority to speak to the world on matters of "embodied" life.

The second manner of thinking about the relationship of the body and soul is a mirror image of the first. In this second way, instead of seeing the two as rigidly separate, the body and soul are instead seen as so intimately linked that any sickness or bodily ailment is an indication of sinfulness or a lack of adequate faith. In this view, God visits his punishments on the body as a means of disciplining the wayward or reprobate soul.

If we assume either of these positions, whether the claim that the body and the soul have nothing to do with one another, or that the body (and its ailments) are slaves to the condition of the soul, we may find ourselves astonished, like the scribes, or simply bewildered and uncomfortable, with the Church's sacrament of anointing the sick.

We may be uncomfortable because this sacrament is so often given to the

The Tennessee Register is publishing Faith Sharing, a series of articles exploring various elements of our faith. The article, many of them written by faculty and staff at Aquinas College, will follow the general curriculum of the Why Catholic? small faith community and adult formation program. This year, the second of the Why Catholic? program, the articles will examine the Sacraments.

gravely ill and the dying; so much so that is, for many Catholics, the "hidden" or "unspeakable" sacrament. If it is only to be given in such dire circumstances, then even the mention of it must mean that we have given up hope for recovery. "Call in the priest," it seems, only when the doctors and the family have no more answers.

We may be uncomfortable because asking for healing, when the circumstances are not dire, feels awkward. If we just have a cold, or back pain, or a headache, we may be reluctant to seek the sacrament because these ailments are "not serious enough" to warrant Christ's attention. If we are not in grave illness, we may wonder how are we to know when we are deserving of the possibility that Christ will say to us, "Get up and walk"?

Yet in the sacrament of the anointing of the sick, the Church offers us a different way to think about the relationship of our souls and bodies than the two mentioned above. By participating in this sacrament, we are neither affirming that the body is the slave to the soul nor that the body is wholly separate from the soul.

Instead, through this sacrament we affirm the mysterious and fragile unity between soul and body. God does not only love our souls, but rather the whole of us. Moreover, God does not punish our bodies for the state of our souls. Rather, as the Apostle Paul was reminded, it is in the frailties of our bodies that the strength of Christ is made manifest. This strength is not apart from us, but rather manifest in our very weaknesses.

Whether in Mass or at the bedside, when a priest administers the sacrament, anointing the sick, he does so with words that include, "May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up." In these words we hear the promise of our healing, as well as the promise that we will rise again – body and soul – in the resurrection that is to come.

In these words we hear the echo of Christ's words to the paralytic man in the story from the Gospels. In the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, we meet the very Christ who healed the lame, cleansed the lepers, and raised Lazarus from the grave.

It is difficult to admit that we suffer, just as it might be difficult to imagine that anyone in the world would want to be "burdened" with our suffering. Therefore, when we allow ourselves to be anointed in times of illness, we are committing an act of profound trust. Like the man laying on the mat as he was lowered through the roof beams, we are allowing ourselves to be carried to the place of healing, admitting that the power that heals us and carries us, both, is not our own. It is grace.

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