



Blessing of the Sick

As we remember the dead in November, we inevitably recall what led up to their passing: illness of body and soul in all its dispiriting variety – chronic, disabling, demoralizing; swift, dismaying, overwhelming. The question comes to us that came to Thomas Merton: “What shall we answer when we come to be examined by pain?”

Throughout the Gospels the evangelists highlight our Redeemer’s preoccupation with the sufferings of the sick. Entering the synagogue to teach for the first time, He was met by the repulsive shrieking of “a man with an unclean spirit.” To the amazement of the onlookers, our Jesus promptly cast the demon out. He then proceeded to the sick bed of Peter’s mother-in-law, took her by the hand, and lifted her out of her fever. Such power continued to go forth from Him to the very last night of His life, when His touch healed the sword-struck ear of the high priest’s slave in the Garden of Gethsemani.

To His Church our Lord entrusted His power to heal. Through the hand of the priest in the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick Jesus continues to touch those for whom the shadow of death takes the form of grave illness or old age. In the words of the *Catechism*, the sacrament of the sick “completes the holy anointings that mark the whole Christian life . . . This last anointing fortifies the end of our earthly life like a solid rampart for the final struggles before entering the Father’s house.”

But not every illness is deadly. Long before death begins to hover in the background, we may be stricken with suffering that is not so much “final” as it is perpetual—the constant, crippling pain of arthritis; the merciless progression of Parkinson’s; the un-liftable weight of depression. In search of “courage to endure in a Christian manner” such intractable long-term suffering, those bowed down can turn to the Church, not for the *Sacrament* of the Sick, but for a powerful *sacramental*: the Rite of the *Blessing* of the Sick. Anointing has no place in this prayerful ritual, but it does include imposition of hands by the priest; and non-Catholics can come forward to have hands laid on them too. (The Rite of Blessing can also be done instead of Anointing for individuals as well.)

For years when I was pastor in Medford, I used to offer this service monthly. To make it accessible to working people, it was held at 5:30 in mid-week so attendees could be home for dinner shortly after 6:00. Mass was never celebrated in conjunction with it.

It didn’t take long for this disarmingly simple yet deeply moving prayer to take root in our midst. Many people came every month; others, for as long as their malady persisted. As a priest, there were few activities I so enjoyed being part of.

At our Clergy Assembly this fall in Powell Butte I introduced the Rite of the Blessing of the Sick to the priests of the diocese and encouraged them to offer it in their parishes. I hope they will do so, and I hope many of you will let yourselves be touched by the peace I know it can bring.