

‘Be of good cheer: I have overcome the world.’

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Given on 30 June 1987 in South-East London, at the Church of St Thomas More, Bexley Heath, in a service of healing held during a Dominican-led parish mission.

Here, tonight, we are going to perform one of the most ancient ceremonies of the Church. The Letter of St. James was written perhaps only twenty or thirty years after the death and resurrection of our Lord, and we shall be anointing and praying over the sick of this parish in an almost identical way to that described there:

Is there any among you that are sick?

Let him call for the elders of the church and let them pray over him, and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.

(5:14)

Oil in the ancient world was a very precious commodity. It was used in cooking, as it still is today, but also for washing, as there was no soap in the ancient world. And it was used as medicine. It was rubbed into the body and it was drunk.

The liturgical use of anointing in the church has a long history and has varied a lot over the centuries. At some periods sick people or their friends went to the church to collect the blessed oil and they would anoint themselves or get others to do it for them if they were too ill. But for a long while and in fact until very recently this sacrament was thought of chiefly as the sacrament of the death bed—‘extreme unction’. There has, however, been a change in the Church’s understanding of what she does, and now we once again anoint people whom we have every expectation of recovering; we also anoint those whose condition is not going to change very much, the elderly, whose bodies will no longer do for them what they once did, and the chronically sick, and those suffering from psychiatric illness, and the physically and mentally handicapped—all these, besides the dying. We do this because in the sacrament of anointing, as in all the sacraments, we meet God in our worship and we come to know that he loves us and has forgiven us our sins and heals us and so, whether we suffer from a sickness from which we will recover, a chronic illness or one which is bringing us to death, we will be more

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closely united to Jesus, who became man to heal the sick and call sinners to repentance so that we ourselves might become sacraments to show others what God is like.

In the letter of James we are told that the sick person should call upon the elders; it is for us to request this anointing when we feel we need it. James is talking about the elders going to the sick person. But you have come here. This isn't merely to make life easy for the clergy. No, we have come here to celebrate this sacrament because we are part of a community; all of us here represent the whole Church. We are the body of Christ. And, like any body, if one part of the body is sick the rest of the body suffers too. So we have *all* come here to be healed and have our sins forgiven, even if we are not actually anointed today. And we have come to pray for ourselves and each other. In the gospel of St John Jesus says at the last supper: 'In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.' (16:33) I think that those words, in the teeth of what we so often experience in our lives, are very hard to believe. And, for me, the same is true of the Creed, which we say at Mass on Sundays and big feasts. I don't know about you, but the Creed is not a prayer which I say on my own; it's a pretty daunting set of things to say that I believe in. But that's because it's not simply my faith but *our* faith; it is a faith which I can proclaim because others dare to proclaim it also. At every Mass we proclaim our faith that the risen Jesus has overcome death. We are stating that faith in a special way by anointing those amongst us who are sick. But, given our own experiences of illness, that might be a little difficult for some of us to do just on our own.

At the beginning of June last year a fellow-Dominican from our Oxford priory was diagnosed as having cancer of the pancreas, and he died ten months later. I was very angry. Angry at the pain Osmund was suffering; angry that my friend was dying. I didn't believe that illness was in any way a punishment for sin. Jesus makes it quite clear that this isn't how God works. But what was God doing? It was so unfair. Why him? I also wondered what was the point of having loved someone for seventeen years only to have to watch him die of cancer.

Illness undermines our confidence that we know what life is about. Many people try to cope with illness and death by trying to find neat explanations to fit it all together. 'What could be more natural than being born and in a variety of ways taking ill and dying?'

The Bible shows that there's nothing at all natural about suffering and dying; it's all a ghastly mistake that could only be sorted out by God becoming man and living a fully human life. Human history is full of stories of great good coming out of the evil of suffering. But that is not what suffering is for. We know that God in the face of human suffering does very remarkable things, but he doesn't send illness in order to obtain some good. Rather, he looks on our suffering and because he

loves us so much he can come to us in moments that we could not have expected. Think about the crucifixion; do you really think that God wanted that to happen? But out of it came our salvation, our healing, our immortality. Look what God did with a dead body on a cross.

In the last weeks of Osmund's illness I had to wash him because he could no longer wash himself, and daily I was watching his body being destroyed by cancer. It was hard to believe that Jesus had really destroyed death. But our faith is that the evils of sickness and death are defeated by Jesus, for although we get ill and die we die, as Jesus did, in order to rise again. And in nursing Osmund I came to realise a little more of what our faith means: that the next time I see and touch Osmund will be in the resurrection. And because we believe in the resurrection we honour our bodies in sickness and in health and in death.

The sacrament of anointing helps us affirm our faith in the resurrection. It also helps us fight back. More than that, it helps us to take our part in the redemption of the world. As says in one of the hymns for the feast of the Sacred Heart:

The love of God was shown to man
In Christ our Saviour's wounded heart;
He asks us now to share his Cross
And in his passion take our part.

The words of this hymn reminded me of something we were constantly told to do at school whenever we had some complaint or grumble. 'Offer it up.' And millions of people cope with their illness by doing just that. But do you realise that their 'offering it up' is part of how we are all redeemed, part of how we are healed?

Paul, in his letter to the Colossians says:

Now I rejoice in my suffering for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. (1:24)

Paul does not mean here that Christ has somehow only left the job of our salvation half done. No, what he's saying is to do with the uniqueness of human experience. Jesus was a man and had a life history like all of us. But he wasn't a woman, he didn't live to old age, he wasn't crippled with arthritis or have heart disease, he wasn't an alcoholic, or suffer from depression or have AIDS. But through all of us Jesus experiences everything that happens to us, for we are his body, living with his life. Just as the Father did not disregard the sufferings of Jesus, so in this sacrament we can take our place with Jesus on the cross, because God unites our sufferings to the passion of Jesus for the life of the world, to bring us to the kingdom where there will be no more pain and where every tear will be wiped away.

This is our faith. All the same, so often illness in ourselves and in others, especially those we love, can seem nothing more than an ugly

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mess, a cruel joke. It can make us feel that our faith is madness, or perhaps even a lie, and just because we may be able to see the hand of God at work today things might not seem so clear tomorrow. But when things seem like that, when no answers come, try to remember Jesus at the very end of his earthly life: Jesus on the cross. There he had nothing clever to say, no satisfactory explanations. The gospel writers tell us that before he died one of the things that he said was 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up again.' (Jn 2:19) But it wasn't from the cross that he said it. There were people at the crucifixion who remembered what he said and threw the words back in Jesus' face. What he did say from the cross was, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' The Father has not forsaken any of us, but it can seem like that sometimes.

Sacraments are ways God has to show us how much he loves us, and with them we celebrate birth, growing up, eating and drinking, coping with illness, falling in love, living in the Church, and death. In the sacraments we do not pretend that life is other than it is: a mixture of joy and pains, things that have no easy answers or perhaps no answer at all. But by Christ's death and resurrection we are brought to a new life with God, we are healed and made human, fit to love each other and God. When Osmund was dying he wrote this:

At fifty-seven I cannot know whether I shall live or die, but our hope is that we shall live, really live before we die and live again after we die. There is only life on either side of death, and life is always sheltered under the providence of God.

Reviews

NEW LAW AND LIFE: 60 PRACTICAL QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON THE NEW CODE OF CANON LAW edited by E. Rinere. *Canon Law Society of America*, Washington DC. 1986. Pp.vii + 103. No price given

MARRIAGE STUDIES III, edited by T.P. Doyle. *Canon Law Society of America*, Washington DC. 1986. Pp.ix + 208. \$4.50.

As one scholar put it, 'casuistry' in modern English is a dirty word. It means whatever is sneaky, devious and jesuitical, 'jesuitical' meaning whatever is sneaky, devious and casuistic. This view, a prejudice really, dismisses too much of value in our tradition, and in fact there is a modest resurgence of the question-and-answer method, an ally of casuistry. Under review is a set of sixty questions answered by a team of canon lawyers, originally in a newspaper column carried by nearly thirty Catholic papers in the United States.

The questions are arranged in sections, covering sacraments and sacred rites, marriage and annulment, Catholic people and practice and finally Church structures and operations. Most of the questions are asked frequently enough: can women be altar