

Suffering, Death, and Dying

The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick

Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation

Rev. John LaFarge, SJ (1880 – 1963) was raised in a family that could be considered American aristocracy. His father, John LaFarge was a world renowned artist. His mother Margaret Mason Perry was the granddaughter of Oliver Hazard Perry, victor of the Battle of Lake Erie (1813). His family lived among the American elite in Newport, Rhode Island. When John told his family of his plans to enter the seminary, they were not pleased. What seemed to bring them around was a family friend, Theodore Roosevelt, who stated that John had a vocation from God, and that this was the life he should follow.

John traveled to Europe and studied in the Jesuit seminary in Innsbruck, in the then Austro-Hungarian Empire. He was well traveled and educated, used only to receiving the best life had to offer. In the first years of his ministry as a Jesuit priest he was assigned as a chaplain at Blackwell's Island (today Roosevelt Island). In 1907 when LaFarge was assigned, Blackwell's Island was last step in the journey for the poor and destitute of New York City. There they were kept until they died and were buried in a pauper's grave. In the ethic of the time they were simply housed, with no sense of pastoral care, just considered the refuse of the world.

John LaFarge's experience of coming into this world must not have been unlike that of Gautama the Buddha leaving his father's sheltered compound to discover illness, age, and death in the outside world. Gautama left the sheltered compound to discover the meaning of life. John LaFarge entered this world with his faith in Jesus Christ and the ministry of the sacraments. He was especially moved in celebrating the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, at that time called the Sacrament of Extreme Unction which was only administered when someone was in danger of death.

“During my eight months on the Island I administered the Sacrament of Extreme Unction some three thousand times. I have heard and read much of the power of this sacrament, about which Father Kern S.J., had lectured so eloquently at Innsbruck. Now I had the chance of witnessing this power, and it was dramatically evident before my eyes. So many times that I could not count them, I would see a change come over the

patients the moment they had received the holy oils. These people were simple; they were derelicts and all earthly comfort and hope had left them; they were thrown on the Creator, and the Creator made good His word. He was a hundred percent “there,” in a vigorous, dramatic manner that often took my breath away.

On one occasion I was called to a woman – she was an East European German afflicted with some neurological trouble, out of her mind, raving and tied by the usual bandages to the bed. For hours and days no means had been discovered of calming her. She glared at me; something seemed to repel her from me. Yet the moment I merely touched the edge of her eyelid with the holy oils, she relaxed, fell back quietly on the bed, took a deep breath and from that time on until her death was peaceful, tranquil, and rational.” (The Manner is Ordinary John LaFarge, S.J. New York; Harcourt. Brace. 1954, pp. 151 – 152)

John LaFarge went on to fifteen years of pastoral ministry in Jesuit rural missions in St. Mary’s County, Maryland. While there he established the first school system for elementary and high school for white and African-American students, and witnessed first-hand the evil of racial prejudice. He would work on issues of racial relations for the rest of his life.

As chaplain at Blackwell’s Island John encountered the stark realities of suffering, death and dying. When Jesus came into our world and ministered to the people, he encountered these same realities. Their response was to not to enter into the endless discussion of why suffering, death and dying exist in our world, but to care for the person before them, to bring the experience of God’s presence through word and touch. As the Son of God, Jesus came to bring salvation to the world. As a priest, John LaFarge’s vocation was to mediate that salvation through the life he led and the sacraments he celebrated.

This introduction will discuss the practical issues we as Catholics face as Jesus’ disciples; Jesus’ care and concern for others who are suffering, dead or dying.

## THE SAVING PRESENCE OF JESUS CHRIST

In the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles Luke presents Jesus' work of salvation as bringing healing to the person suffering and helping them become whole once again. The Greek word *sozo* that is most often translated as healing, or the person becoming well, is also the word that means "saved".

One of the most dramatic stories of Jesus' healing of a person who was suffering can be seen in the story of the Gerasene Demoniac (Luke 8: 26 – 39). The man possessed by demons lived naked in a tomb on the outskirts of town. Everyone feared him as he could not be kept in restraints. There is a comic element to the story when the Jesus confronted the demons as they did not want to return to the abyss, and Jesus consented that they enter a herd of pigs which promptly ran into the lake. (Luke 8: 32 – 33).

When the people came to see what was going on, they found Jesus and the man who was now clothed, rational having been healed (*sozo* or saved) by Jesus. When the man asked if he could follow Jesus, Jesus said, 39 "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him. (Luke 8: 39)

So the salvation that Jesus offers involves the healing of the whole person, and returning him to the community.

In a second well-known story in Luke 7: 1 – 10 a Centurion sent some Jewish elders to Jesus to plead for the healing of his slave who was close to death. The Centurion was well regarded in the Jewish community as a generous man who had built their local synagogue. When Jesus said that he would come the Centurion sent him the message:

"Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; 7" "therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. 8 For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." (Luke 7: 6 – 8)."

“Jesus was amazed at the man’s faith, and when the Jewish emissaries returned home they found that the slave was in good health.

In response to the faith of the Centurion, Jesus saves and heals his servant. Luke also makes the point that Jesus achieved this work of salvation and healing from a distance. At the time of his writing Luke’s readers and those listening to this gospel are distant from Jesus in time and space. Luke is assuring them that such distance is meaningless in that Jesus is reaching out over time and space to bring his healing graces into their lives today.

As Neal Flanagan, OSM writes in his article “The What and How of Salvation in Luke-Acts”

Essentially, and very simply, *Lucan salvation is a healing*. It can include physical healing, it must include the deeper, more pervasive healing which is forgiveness of sins (Luke 1:77| Acts 5:31). Jesus’ physical healings are sign, symbol, sacrament, manifestation, and proof of spiritual healing with which they are allied. Luke’s vocabulary happily embraces both. (Neal Flanagan, OSM, “The What and How of Salvation in Luke-Acts”, in Daniel Durken, OSB (ed), *Sin, Salvation, and the Spirit*. Collegeville, MN, The Liturgical Press, 1979)

## **JESUS CHRIST’S HEALING PRESENCE IN THE CHURCH TODAY**

As we have seen in the example of John LaFarge, the saving grace of Jesus is present in the celebration of the sacraments. The principal sacraments of healing are the Sacraments of Penance and the Anointing of the Sick.

“Heal the sick!” The Church has received this charge from the Lord 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 and that St. Paul suggests is connected with bodily health. (CCC 1509)

## **SACRAMENT OF PENANCE**

When someone is conscious of approaching death and is still lucid there is the opportunity to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance. Nothing focuses someone's attention as the thought of making a final settling of debts to God and others. In these moments of final clarity the Sacrament of Penance offers the restoration of grace for all the sins someone has committed. Celebrating the Sacrament of Penance reconciles the penitent with the Church and increases the bond with the communion of saints in heaven, the community of which the dying person will soon be a member.

In this final confession of sins, penitents place themselves before the merciful judgment of God anticipating the Particular Judgment they soon will be facing before God. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches

For it is now in this life, that we are offered the choice between life and death, and it is only by the road of conversion that we can enter the Kingdom, from which one is excluded by grave sin. In converting to Christ through penance and faith, the sinner passes from death to life and "does not come into judgment." (John 5:24) CCC 1470

For those who are caring for persons in danger of death, assuring that a priest is called to minister the Sacrament of Penance in a timely way that gives the person in danger of death the opportunity to be reconciled to God and others.

## **SACRAMENT OF ANOINTING OF THE SICK**

The celebration of the Sacrament of Anointing includes the priest laying hands on the sick, praying over them, and anointing them with blessed oil. In receiving the sacrament, the person in need is united with the passion of Christ, strengthened in peace and courage to face the sufferings of illness or old age, and the forgiveness of sins if the person suffering is not able to obtain it through the Sacrament of Penance.

In the Church today the Sacrament of Anointing may be celebrated not only for those in danger of death, but anytime when the believer is seriously ill or facing the difficulties of old age. The sacrament may be received again if the person's condition worsens.

## **VIATICUM**

When the believer is close to dying the Eucharist is offered as viaticum (literally “on the way with you” from the Latin). In his resurrection Jesus “passed over” from death into new life with the Father. The Eucharist is the Body and Blood of the Risen Christ which we receive as the promise of our entering into this new life with Jesus and the Father.

The sacrament of Christ once dead and now risen, the Eucharist is here the sacrament of passing over from death to life, from this world to the Father. (CCC 1524)

## **CONCLUSION**

Suffering, death and dying are the constants of life, no one leaves unscathed. This is the world Jesus entered and to which he brought the power of his healing touch so that those who suffered could be brought back to wholeness in life. Through his own passion, death, and resurrection Jesus also leads us through the journey in life and death which ultimately leads us to life in the Father.

As Jesus’ disciples we are called to be a healing and saving presence in the world. While we have seen the Sacraments of Healing as the principal way in which Christ’s healing presence is celebrated, in our own time and space we can in practical ways bring healing and saving grace to all who suffer. As this link develops these practical ways will be explored.