

BASIC CHRISTIANITY

Lecture Number 16

THE CHURCH'S MINISTRY TO THE SICK AND DYING

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INTRODUCTION

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Our present society is the heir of the “Christian synthesis.” The Christian synthesis was a unified world-view, or out-look, which Europe had developed by the time of the thirteenth century.

That was the world-view of St.Thomas Aquinas. And that world-view understood reality as consisting of both universals and particulars. We discussed this in the first lecture.

St. Thomas said that not only are there individual, or particular, human beings, but there is also something we can call “humanity,” or human nature. Thus, as the Church has always taught, Jesus is not just one man, but he is also the new humanity—Man. In him, God united to himself humanity. If that were not so there would be no salvation.

Our present society, however, is also the heir of a different outlook, an outlook which is incompatible with the Christian synthesis and which is destructive of it. It is a diabolical mindset, which became fashionable among some philosophers in the fourteenth century.

The name of this different outlook is *Nominalism*. And it has gone on to gain great currency, because it appeals to that which all fallen human beings share—the sin of pride. The main exponent of this school of thought was named William of Occam.

William of Occam and the nominalists said that there are no *universals*, only individual things, only *particulars*. That which is called a universal has only a nominal existence; it exists in name only. So they would say that there is no such reality as humanity. Human beings merely share the *name* “human.” That is why it is called Nominalism (from Latin *nomen*, name).

The idea that only individuals exist leads inevitably to the notion that what separates us is what is most important. And that means that the individual person is cut off and isolated. This mindset has become a dogma for contemporary western man.

But remember, it is the nature of *sin* to separate and isolate and eventually bring death.

On the other hand, it is the nature of *love* to seek union and to bring into harmony and closeness those who are separated, that is, to bring life.

Modern western man is characterized by loneliness and isolation. Every sociologist you can find says the same thing. Our age is characterized by disintegration and by the breakdown of its relationships and institutions.

We all have a desperate hunger for community. We are always talking about *community*, but, as a society, we do not have it. That is why we are always talking about it. We are compulsive joiners trying to lose ourselves in organizations and movements but with little hope of doing so.

To be cut off from our fellow man, existentially, is to be cut off from God. Isolation brings a sense of loneliness and guilt.

And when you get sick, you are also cut off from others and from the rest of life.

The Church's ministry to the sick is a reaching out to embrace the sick person. It is designed to make him know that he is still included just as much as ever in the community of the Church.

In the time of Jesus, people said the world was swarming with devils. Sin, they said, lets the devils get a hold on a person and that is what causes sickness.

Nowadays, we are much more sophisticated. We don't talk about demons. We say that sickness is caused by viruses which are all around us. And we get sick when our resistance drops. And that happens when we are under stress. And stress can be not only physical but spiritual also. And guilt is one of the most common forms of stress.

So sin can let the virus get hold of a person.

Incidentally, devils are fallen angels. They are pure spirit. Each angel is a species all its own. An angel is where he thinks. Remember the lecture on Man (No. 3).

In terms of the psychology of Carl Jung, an angel is much like a complex.

The experience of an angel can be a little like a tune which seems almost to hum itself for no reason you can think of. You just catch yourself humming it over and over again. It is simply present to you. Or it is like an idea or image which keeps coming back to you on its own.

Devils are present to us in the same way as angels.

At any rate, the very isolation which sickness brings adds to the stress the patient is under. He is in a state similar to that which comes from guilt. And his physical isolation tends to undermine his faith.

He needs to have his faith strengthened. And the Church's ministry is designed to do just that.

So let us review the nature of faith.

FAITH

Faith is a spiritual disposition of the soul which consists of a closeness to God, an adherence to God with the will. It is almost a preoccupation with God. But it does not prevent you from concentrating on whatever it is that needs your attention.

Faith is not a matter of feeling. Although positive and negative feelings can appear to support or weaken your faith.

Faith does not require the leisure to be thinking about God. In fact, faith is what is going on when we are busy obeying God.

In the state of faith, the world is seen in perspective as what it is, as a transient image and mirror of God's creative love.

Faith is an active willing of God's will. In its early stages it is a willing of God's will *in principle*. In its mature form it is the willing of God's will *in detail*, because the person has come to think the way God thinks and to look at the world the same way that God does.

In a state of faith, especially mature faith, prayers get answered and miracles happen, because you are praying for what God wants to give.

Often, the faith that works miracles is not the faith of the sick person but the faith of other people. The sick person's faith may have been weakened.

For example, in the case of the paralyzed man who was let down to Jesus through the hole in the roof, it was the faith of those who brought him that made the miracle of healing possible. [Matthew 9:1-8; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:17-26]

But there must always be faith on the part of someone. Jesus, we are told, was unable to do any miracles in his home town of Nazareth because of the lack of faith of the people there.

NOTIFICATION

The first rubric on page 453 of the Prayer Book says, "In case of illness, the minister of the congregation is to be notified."

When you are sick, you are responsible to see that the priest is notified. If you cannot do it, then it is the responsibility of your family and friends.

Every parish priest can tell tales about the occasional church-goer who complained that when he was in the hospital, "Father never came to see me!"

With all the strange and wonderful gifts that are bestowed upon a priest when he is ordained, clairvoyance is not one of them. It is not enough for him to learn of it by rumor. Does your physician call when he "hears" that you are sick?

The principle involved is a respect for the rights of the person as well as for his privacy.

Furthermore, since he has not been notified, the priest might suspect that the sick person doesn't want him to call.

At any rate, you have no moral grounds for complaint if you have not received a ministry when you were sick *if* you never requested it.

OPPORTUNITY

Sickness usually brings special temptations. Among these frequently is the temptation to be impatient, or to be resentful, or to be rebellious. And often the patient becomes depressed.

But sickness also brings special opportunities.

Frequently, the confinement which goes with sickness is an opportunity for meditation and contemplation. It can be an excellent time to do some reading.

Sickness also offers you a chance to share in the sufferings of Christ.

There is no bond quite like the bond between people who have gone through great pain and stress together. And the greater the pain or the stress, the stronger the bond is likely to be.

So always look upon all pain as a sharing in the passion of Jesus. And when it is unavoidable, accept it willingly. That will not necessarily make it hurt less. But it will give meaning to what you are undergoing.

It will also help you to appreciate the fact that in your suffering Jesus is there with you.

CONFESSION

Since guilt itself is stressful, and since at times your guilt has contributed to the stress that led to the illness, and since your sins of omission or commission may have contributed directly to the illness, it is very appropriate for you to make your confession.

The 1928 Prayer Book, in the Order for the Visitation of the Sick, said, “Then shall the sick person be moved to make a special confession of his sins, if he feel his conscience troubled with any matter; after which confession, on evidence of his repentance, the Minister shall assure him of God’s mercy and forgiveness.” [p. 313]

The 1979 Prayer Book says, “The priest may suggest the making of a special confession, if the sick person’s conscience is troubled, and use the form for the Reconciliation of a Penitent.” [p. 454]

The priest, more often than not, will not suggest you make a confession, unless you have indicated that there is something bothering you. But certainly, if there is any chance at all of death, you should confess any serious sins there may be on your conscience. Of course, if no priest is available, tell God at once that you are sorry. In fact, do that anyway.

HOLY UNCTION

St. James says in his epistle, “Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders, (presbyters) of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.” [James 5:14,15]

Originally, Holy Unction, anointing with oil, was a ministry of healing. But when the Roman Empire of the west collapsed, life became dangerous and unpredictable. Because of the circumstances, it became less and less common for the sick to be anointed unless death were near. So it came primarily to be thought of as part of the preparation for death.

And since it was chronologically the last of the various anointings a Christian would receive in his life, the first being at baptism, it was called “last” or “extreme” unction. That got turned

around and came to be thought of as meaning “unction in extremis”, or unction at the point of death. And it ceased to be used in those cases of sickness when there was no threat of death.

The Anglican Communion has restored Unction to its original and proper role as a ministry to all the sick and not just to the dying.

The purpose of Holy Unction is to reconcile the sick person to God. And when that has happened, even the natural powers of recovery have a better chance of success.

Apparently, anxiety and other forms of stress stimulate the production of adrenalin, which in turn retards the production of white corpuscles which are used by the body to fight infection.

Miraculous healings are not uncommon in response to Unction. Many parish priests can tell of particular cases. (*example here*)

Nevertheless, Unction is not magic. We cannot *assume* that a miraculous physical healing will occur. And that is not quite what St. James is saying. He speaks of the sick man being “saved”. Being saved may, or may not, involve restoration to physical health. And being “raised up” by the Lord may refer simply to the resurrection of the dead.

As a matter of fact, when a sick person has been anointed, one of several things may occur:

The sick person may get worse and even die;

Or the sick person’s condition may remain just about the same;

Or he may get better and even recover completely.

Remember, the purpose of Unction is to reconcile the person to God, to restore his faith. And when you are reconciled to God, when your faith is strong, you are ready and even eager for whatever God may have in store for you.

In any particular case it may serve God’s larger purpose for the sick person to die, just as the death of Jesus served God’s larger purpose. Or it may serve God’s purpose for him to recover.

HOLY COMMUNION

When you are unable to get to church, the priest or deacon will bring Holy Communion to you. In some circumstances, lay people are licensed by the bishop to do that. All you have to do is ask in order to have it brought to you.

Usually he brings some of the consecrated Bread from the church. For practical reasons it is not nearly so common for him to bring the consecrated Wine.

In the case of long, drawn-out convalescences, sometimes the priest may arrange to celebrate in the patient’s hospital room or in his home.

When you are making arrangements for Holy Communion to be brought, be sure to:

Say exactly how many will be present to receive communion;

Say exactly when the priest will be expected;

Ask if there are any special arrangements he would like to have made.

PREPARATION FOR DEATH

Death is usually preceded by sickness in our society, so sickness is a healthy reminder of our mortality.

In our society, people are usually not prepared to die. And at the time of a person's death it is a little late for him to *start* trying to get ready.

When a sick person is told he is likely to die, he is inclined to get upset and panicky. That interferes with whatever chance of recovery he has. Furthermore, few physicians like to admit that their patients die. So, for a number of reasons, sick people often are not told that they are about to die. But every person needs to know when he is about to die, so that he can do it well!

It is possible to prepare in advance for death so that when it comes it can be done well. *Now* is the time to start getting ready for it. And if you do so, you will be able to go to your own death in happy anticipation of seeing our Lord face to face and entering into his joy.

The ideal preparation for death is the same as the ideal preparation for receiving Holy Communion. So ask yourself what you would do, reasonably, if you knew that tomorrow night you would die in your sleep. How would you spend tomorrow?

You would make peace with everyone from whom you are alienated. If you could not do it in person, you would write them letters.

You would get your financial affairs in order, so that your family would be spared worry and trouble after your death.

You would make a will.

You would confess your sins, to a priest if possible.

You would make a deliberate mental act of turning loose of your family and friends, knowing that God loves them far more than you ever did.

You would commend your soul into the hands of God who loves you.

And you would go to bed and sleep the sleep of the just, prepared to wake up in the paradise of God.

Well, do those same things tomorrow, just as though you were going to die in your sleep tomorrow night. Then go to bed at peace with God and man. If you die in your sleep tomorrow night, you will be ready.

If you do *not* die in your sleep tomorrow night, when you wake up the next morning, it will be

like being born all over again.

And if you do that regularly, every several months, in time all of the anxiety and fear will be gone from the idea of death. In fact, like St. Paul, you will begin to look forward to your death.

Somewhere in Europe, before the second world war, there was a monastery which had an interesting practice.

When a novice joined the community, on his first day, he was given the job of building his own coffin which was a simple pine box. It was then placed in his room, and his bed was made in the box. Every night when he went to bed, he would lie down in the same box in which he knew he would one day be buried.

One night forty or fifty years later, he died. The lid was nailed down on the box, with him in it, and then he was buried.

We should go to bed every night in the same spirit of joyful anticipation of the resurrection. And then when the real thing comes, we will be ready for it.

FUNERALS

Normally a funeral is done in the context of the Eucharist. It is actually a special form of the Liturgy of the Word.

At the time of death, speak to the priest first before you make any arrangements concerning the funeral. By all means leave the planning of the service to him. That is his job.

Ministration at the Time of Death p. 462

When a person is near death, the Minister of the Congregation should be notified, in order that the ministrations of the Church may be provided.

A Prayer for a Person near Death

Almighty God, look on this your servant, lying in great weakness, and comfort *him* with the promise of life everlasting, given in the resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Litany at the Time of Death

When possible, it is desirable that members of the family and friends come together to join in the Litany.

God the Father,
Have mercy on your servant.

God the Son,
Have mercy on your servant.

God the Holy Spirit,
Have mercy on your servant.

Holy Trinity, one God,
Have mercy on your servant.

From all evil, from all sin, from all tribulation,
Good Lord, deliver him.

By your holy Incarnation, by your Cross and Passion, by
your precious Death and Burial,
Good Lord, deliver him.

By your glorious Resurrection and Ascension, and by the
Coming of the Holy Spirit,
Good Lord, deliver him.

We sinners beseech you to hear us, Lord Christ: That it may
please you to deliver the soul of your servant from the power
of evil, and from eternal death,
We beseech you to hear us, good Lord.

That it may please you mercifully to pardon all *his* sins.
We beseech you to hear us, good Lord.

That it may please you to grant *him* a place of refreshment
and everlasting blessedness,
We beseech you to hear us, good Lord.

That it may please you to give *him* joy and gladness in your
kingdom, with your saints in light,
We beseech you to hear us, good Lord.

Jesus, Lamb of God:
Have mercy on him.

Jesus, bearer of our sins:
Have mercy on him.

Jesus, redeemer of the world:
Give him your peace.

Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

Officiant and People

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

The Officiant says this Collect

Let us pray.

Deliver your servant, *N.*, O Sovereign Lord Christ, from all evil, and set *him* free from every bond; that *he* may rest with all your saints in the eternal habitations; where with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

A Commendation at the Time of Death

Depart, O Christian soul, out of this world;
In the name of God the Father Almighty who created you;
In the name of Jesus Christ who redeemed you;
In the name of the Holy Spirit who sanctifies you.
May your rest be this day in peace,
and your dwelling place in the Paradise of God.

A Commendatory Prayer

Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant *N.* Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive *him* into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light. **Amen**

✝ May *his* soul and the souls of all the departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. **Amen.**

Prayers for a Vigil, p. 465

Reception of the Body, p. 466

The Burial of the Dead, Rite One, p. 469

The Burial of the Dead, Rite Two, p. 491.