

3/31/02

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Low expectations of healing through prayer need raising

Healing is a subject that can make people nervous. I think many Catholics are uncomfortable talking about healing.

First of all, there's a lot of healing that supposedly goes on around here and on television that strikes us as suspect. So we have some basis for being skeptical.

Second, there's the question of why healing works for some but not for others. Why are some healed? Because of their faith? So if a person prays for healing and isn't healed they must not have had enough faith? Is that how it works?

Third, there's the historical issue. I think many of us believe that Jesus healed and that healing continued for a while in the early Church but then it pretty much died out. So it seems that while there have been a few instances of healing in recent centuries, the general attitude in the Catholic world is that healing is basically something seen in the rear view mirror.

Then there's the science angle. Healing does take place today, but it happens through the efforts of skilled doctors and the medical technology that we have. We tend to think there might even be a scientific explanation for what were thought to be miracles in the past. Science rules.



We pray for sick people all the time in the Catholic Church, but I wonder if any of us really expect physical healing to take place. For the reasons I have given and maybe some others, our expectation level is pretty low.

A few years ago, I ran into a friend after Mass on a Monday evening at Holy Family Cathedral. He seemed distraught. I asked him if he was OK, and he told me he was going to have heart bypass surgery that Thursday. I suggested to him that it might be good to have a priest give him the anointing of the sick sometime before the operation with a few prayerful people there for support. He said he was sure things would be OK and he didn't want anyone to go to any trouble.

That night, my friend called me at home. He had reconsidered. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to receive the sacramental anointing.

On Wednesday afternoon, my friend gathered with our parish priest, me, my friends, Hector and Marge, and Hector's two young children. The priest administered the anointing. We prayed. We left. The whole thing took less than 20 minutes. No big deal.

That evening, my friend called again. He told me that if anyone ever wanted prayer before an operation to give him a call. He said that during the anointing service that afternoon, his whole body had felt like it was on fire, and that when the

sensation of heat had gone away that he then experienced a feeling of peace and confidence. He had an absolute conviction that his operation would be completely successful.

I know that God's grace was responsible for what happened to my friend, but for some reason I couldn't help but picture the faces of Hector's two young children as they had prayed earlier that day. I thought it was those two innocent children with their direct line to heaven that made the difference.

The Catholic Catechism indicates that the sacramental anointing of the sick is "meant to lead the sick person to healing of the soul, but also of the body if such is God's will." If one who receives the anointing has committed sins, the sins will also be forgiven by the effect of the sacrament.

Healing isn't an end in itself. The absence of healing is not a failure or an indication of a lack of faith. But we need to increase our expectations when it comes to physical healing. Jesus healed, His disciples healed, and the Holy Spirit is still with us. Just waiting to be asked, I would suppose.

Our closing verse is from the Letter of James: "Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up."