



**Third Sunday of Advent
December 12, 2010 A**

**— HEALING PRAYER —
A POWERFUL SPIRITUAL RESOURCE**

In today's Gospel, Jesus says: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them."

Last weekend at most of the Masses, I said that our parishes would be *much more powerful places* if we, priests and people, took seriously our call to pray with each other when we are sick or are experiencing other problems and issues.

Presently, I am reading *The Practice of Healing Prayer* by Francis MacNutt, PhD, (on Amazon for \$10) who has been actively involved in the healing ministry for forty years. In his introduction to the book, Francis writes:

As I begin writing this book, I am excited and filled with enthusiasm because it gives me a chance to share with you a discovery that has transformed my life—and that I hope will change yours too. What I most want to share with you is that God still heals sick people when we pray with them—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. And this is not rare; it is common for people to be healed when we pray.

All of us know that when we come down with an illness, we should visit a physician as soon as possible to get the medical help we need. But not everyone knows that we can also pray with the patient for Jesus to heal the affliction. Several years ago, my sister came down with pneumonia, which then progressed to a virulent staph infection. We immediately brought her to the hospital. That night the physician told us that she probably won't live through the night. But we also prayed for her healing—and she survived. Later her physician said that he didn't know of anyone else her age (she was seventy-seven) who had survived such a serious infection.

Nearly all of us have had to face sickness and accidents that threaten our lives or, at the very least, put us out of action for a while. In these times, we can turn to prayer. Praying should be as normal and as immediate as calling the doctor.

On page 23, MacNutt writes:

For the first 350 years, the leaders of the early church taught that every Christian could heal the sick and even cast out evil spirits. For example, Tertullian (around A.D. 200), one of the early Fathers of the Church, asserted that if a man is possessed by an evil spirit, this demon "can be commanded by any Christian at all," and "they are forced to leave the bodies they have invaded" (emphasis added).

In fact, Catholics have never lost their belief in healing prayer. Witness the crowds who travel to the famous shrine in Lourdes (at the foot of the Pyrenees Mountains in France) where thousands of people still come every day during the summer, at a time when France is now largely secular, or in the United States, where devout believers still attend novenas in their parish churches. Nevertheless, three key elements have been greatly diminished:

- 1. People no longer have an **expectant** faith that leads them to believe that they will see astounding healings when they themselves pray.*
- 2. They have also lost the confidence that **anyone** can pray for healing—not just holy people or priests.*
- 3. When they do pray for the sick, it is usually at a distance and not with the sick person, with the laying on of hands.*

During his years of preaching the healing message of Jesus, MacNutt would ask congregations: "How many of you can remember your father praying *with* you for healing when you were sick as a child?" Only about three percent on average could remember their fathers praying *with* them. Most parents pray *for* their children. Only a very small number pray *with* them.

On pages 31-32, Francis writes:

For your encouragement, I want to share my own experience (and that of countless others) that God really does answer prayer. If you learn that perhaps God really will heal someone you love, then you begin to develop an expectant faith. Finally, you decide to launch out and pray. Then, see what happens!

With over forty years of experience, I've seen thousands of sick people at least get better when we pray, and some are totally healed. The most

extraordinary thing of all is how much healing takes place. Once you actually see what happens to bless your family and friends when you pray, your life (and your family's life) will never be the same.

Most of us seem to go through two stages in our personal history of healing prayer. At first, we have little or no belief that anything will happen when we pray for the sick. Then, when we find out how much happens when we pray, we begin to wonder why it doesn't always happen! Yet not everybody we pray for seems to receive healing, and this is a great mystery, which we will never be able to adequately explain with our human reason.

However, suppose a new cancer treatment came on the scene that cured even 10 percent of patients. No one would say that the new drug should not be made available because 90 percent of the patients would be devastated if they didn't get well. Instead, people would rush out to get the new drug or even travel down to Mexico to get treatment. Terminal cancer patients would be greatly encouraged to think that they might be among the group who would be cured. A realistic hope is all that is required!

“I don't have enough faith”

In Matthew 21:22, Jesus says: “If you have faith, everything you ask for in prayer you will receive.” Most of us, probably all of us, have a difficult time believing those words of Jesus. We most likely have a hard time believing that *we* have that kind of expectant faith. Speaking on this issue, MacNutt states (and here I paraphrase):

- We can and should believe that God is on the side of life. Just as we are happy knowing that our friends, parents and children are in good shape, so does God delight in seeing us healthy and strong. During his time on earth, we never hear Jesus tell someone that his/her illness is a good thing.
- We also know that for all of us, there comes a time to die. As Christians, we know that this is not a terrible thing since death is not the end, but the gateway to everlasting life.
- There is a great *mystery* connected with healing prayer. We never know why God seems to answer some prayers and not others—at least in the way we want him to.

Regarding the issue of *expectant* faith, I personally find Francis McNutt's words most helpful and encouraging:

My job is to pray, and it's up to God what happens as a result. My friends have always remarked (to my surprise) that I have great faith, but it doesn't seem that way to me; I don't feel that I have much faith at all,

because when I pray, I usually don't know what's going to happen. I just pray with an “expectant” faith, looking forward to something happening, even though I'm not sure if the person will be healed. What I do believe is that God loves us and that he hears my prayer. In that I have absolute faith.

And that's what I encourage you to have. As a Christian—and as a Catholic—I believe that such an attitude is within your reach, assisted by grace. You can pray for the sick and truly expect God to work miracles through your prayers, even though you may not be sure how or when these wonders will happen!

Once you clear away these two prejudices, you can relax and pray for the sick:

- You don't have to be a “Saint” with a capital “S” to pray for healing. You just need to be a loving, ordinary Christian: a “saint” with a small “s.”
- You may not have certitude about what's going to happen when you pray. But you don't need to know! All you need to do is take the risk of praying for the sick: that's what faith is, and that much you can manage, with God's help.

The most loving attitude we can have toward our sick brothers and sisters is to take the risk of faith and pray for their healing. We all can do that much! (pp. 57-58).

Action suggestions

Reflecting on my readings on the healing ministry, I suggest the following actions, and if you experience positive results, please let me know. Stories of positive results following healing prayer will help us all to be more confident and build up an expectant faith.

- **Parents:** Begin to pray *with* your children when they are hurting, sick, or are agonizing about school issues, etc.
- **Spouses:** Pray *with* each other when one is ill or going through a difficult time.
- **Parish small groups:** Rather than telling “Joe” that the group will be praying for him, let the group lay hands on Joe and pray *over* him and *with* him. Can you imagine the blessings that would come to many in our parish if it gradually became *natural* for us to pray *with* each other.
- Pray for me as I continue to reflect on how we can develop a healing ministry in our parish. Also pray for God's blessing on all our healing prayers, including those we offer during Sunday Mass.

Have a blessed week,

Le Sarah