

Having mentioned a couple of weeks ago how some people are so slooooooow in turning loose of pre-Vatican II thinking and ways – like still asking for *extreme unction* rather than the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick – I thought I should do my part by educating and informing – rather than just complaining. . .

So today's Gospel is but one of many accounts that we find in the Gospels – when Jesus cures a person of their illness. Throughout his ministry, Jesus not only hangs out with the tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners ---- but he goes out of his way to be with the blind, the crippled, the lame; those with fevers, hemorrhages, and the ultimate bad guy: leprosy.

It's important to remember that in Jesus' day there was no Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Palestine – there was no Jewish or Baptist hospital to be found in Jerusalem. So when people got sick – especially with what was considered an incurable disease – they were cast aside from society – ostracized from family and friends – for fear that their sickness would infect those around them – and with the hope that if they had to fend for themselves – they might just do everyone a favor and quietly wander out into the desert and die.

But Jesus reached out and touched them. Jesus listened to their stories. Jesus identified with their pain --- and told them they were okay.

And I think the underlying reason for Jesus' ministry to those who were cut-off from the community because of illness – was his basic and unyielding respect for human life.

Jesus wanted to show by his words, and most especially by his actions – that being sick, having a disease, losing an arm or a leg in an accident, being blind or deaf or leprous, bleeding internally or externally, having a difficulty with speech does not reduce one's value in the eyes of God.

Like Job taught us last week – we have to learn to trust in God's promise that there is meaning in suffering – that whatever happens in this life is not in vain. >>

God comes to us in our time of sorrow – in our time of pain – in our time of need – in our times of feeling helpless and hopeless. The Lord has mercy on us all – the just as well as the unjust --- because he loves us. We are precious in God's eyes – whether we are whole and intact and well – or missing an arm or a leg or are ill.

And Jesus was trying to get the people in his day to see that being sick – should not reduce the value of the individual in the eyes of the community either.

The disciples and the early Church continued Jesus' concern for the sick and suffering. And by the beginning of the second century – when the letter to James is written --- we have developed in the Church a ritual – a Sacrament – for the sick:

“Is anyone sick among you? Then let them send for the priests of the Church. They should pray over them and anoint them with oil. The prayer of faith will save the sick person and the Lord will raise them up. If they have committed in sins, their sins will be forgiven them.” (James 5:14-15)

So notice in the New Testament – it is a sacrament for the sick ----- not the dying.

I think it is unfortunate that for many years in the Church – this Sacrament has only been celebrated in extreme cases – when someone was nearing death – hence the name of the Sacrament many of us learned – *extreme unction* – the final anointing. . .

I mean just think what bad psychology that was – well when you see the priest show up – it means you have at least one foot in the grave – so you might as well abandon all hope – and wander out into the desert to die. . .

I had that reaction by my own father one time. It was many years ago when he had his first heart attack. I was in summer school at the time, so was able to take off a few days to go home to see him.

The first thing he said when I walked into his hospital room was --- well it must be worse than then told me – because the priest is showing up!

Properly understood – in a way the Second Vatican Council restored the thinking of the early Church – anointing is a celebration of the sacramentality (the specialness) of sickness --- the Church’s way of holding up sickness as a unique experience of living. The sick who enter their illness with faith and hope and the support of the community can have a unique encounter with God. They can come to know God in their sickness, in the depths of their suffering, and in special ways we who are not sick do not know Him.

The Sacrament of Anointing is not intended so much as a remedy or cure of the illness, although physical healing may take place – but it should be seen more as a commissioning of these special people – that they may face their weakness and their mortality eye to eye, face to face – and may return to share with us what they have learned.

It is important, then, that the Sacrament take place in the midst of the community – so that the sick may be publicly signed as prophets, as martyrs, as other Christs.

If we look at the Sacrament and sickness in this way – it turns the conventional wisdom of our society on its head.

In a day and age where sickness is a sign of weakness, where non-productivity is scorned, where the old are asked, “what good are you??” – this sacrament recognizes and asserts the special dignity of the ill.

These are the ones who reveal in their bodies the weak Christ who we believe conquers even suffering and death.

As Pope Francis recently said: “We Christians are called to patiently build a more diverse, more welcoming, more humane, more inclusive society that does not discard the weak in body and mind.”

So does this mean there is no such thing as “Last Rites” anymore??? This is the point I think we have really done a poor job of educating people on. . .:

Because the proper Sacrament for one to receive now --- and at the hour of their death --- is the Eucharist – which intimately unites us to the Christ who is both God and human. . . the Christ who suffered, died and rose from the dead.

We call that last Eucharist one has in this life: *VIATICUM: food for the journey*. And that food for the journey, Viaticum, can be given by any person who is a Eucharistic Minister. . .

So am I saying you should not call a priest if someone is dying. Absolutely not! I’m saying this to remind you that if you haven’t noticed – there aren’t 2 and 3 priests in a parish anymore ---- and that your odds in Vegas are much more favorable than finding a priest sitting around with his feet up just waiting for the phone to ring to spring into action.

More than one person has gotten angry with me in my years of priesthood – because I was not available when their loved one was dying. Of course they waited until their loved one was dying – before they ever called. . . when their loved one could have – and should have – been Anointed long before then>

Especially when they were still conscious and able to participate in the Sacraments of Anointing – or Eucharist --- and of Reconciliation. . .

So let’s all adopt a Vatican II understanding of this Sacrament – instead of holding on to the past.