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## Physician, Heal Thyself

Rev. Michael Sawyer, O.S.B.

*Father Sawyer, who is affiliated with the Benedictine Monastery of Hawaii, gave this address at the 1985 NFCPG convention in Hawaii.*

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There once was a physician who lived a long fruitful life and then died. He went up to heaven and was met there by Peter. The physician, with joy, said, "Well, Peter here I am, let me enter in and enjoy my reward."

Peter asked the physician why he thought he should be allowed to enter. The physician, somewhat taken aback, began to recount his virtues. "I believe I was a good doctor and husband. I tried to be sensitive to all the people you sent me — even Mrs. Achingbutt, who was such a complainer. Many nights I came home to a cold supper, because of sick patients. I tried to see Christ in them and treat them accordingly."

Peter said, "That's one point, anything else?" "One point!", the physician repeated. "Well, I was honest in most of my dealings. I don't think I was greedy. I gave freely to the church and even helped poor patients who couldn't afford my services. There were times I neglected my family, but I always made the effort to bring my life back into balance. I truly tried to love all people."

Peter said, "That's two points." "Two points!", the physician said. "How many do I need?" "100", said Peter. "Lord help us!", said the physician. "It's only by the grace of God I'll ever get in!" "That's 98", said Peter. "Come on in."

As the physician does not reach heaven by his own merits, neither do we heal ourselves by our own efforts. It is by the grace and love of Almighty God Who loves us with an everlasting love.

Looking at our Catholic heritage, healing holds a privileged place. In the Old Testament, we see a broad pattern of thought that carries throughout. Yahweh is the author of health and sickness, life and death, blessing and curse, and so healing and sickness both come from God. This thought is pretty well summed up in Dt. 32:39: "See now that I, I am He, and beside me there is no other god. It is I who deal death and life; when I have struck, it is I who heal and none can deliver from my hand."

We see Yahweh much more judge than father. He is the One Who chastises for sin and rewards for faithfulness; and so good fortune, children

and riches are a sign of God's favor; and misfortune, barrenness, and poverty a sign of His disfavor. This attitude is still very much a part of a large segment of the Catholic population. And yet, I believe Christ came proclaiming a different message. "I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full." J. 10:10. Jesus reveals to us a Father Who is totally love. How He loves the sinner, like the woman caught in adultery; the poor, the sick, the outcasts, like the tax collectors. In Luke 5:31-32, Jesus says, "It is not those who are well who need the doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the virtuous, but sinners to repentance." As Catholics, we believe that Jesus is that perfect revelation of God to men.

### **Coming of Jesus**

We see Jesus coming to proclaim the kingdom of God by His preaching, doing battle against the forces of evil and healing. Healing is a major portion of His ministry. He stated specifically that His healing was a sign that the kingdom of heaven was breaking forth. In Mt. 12:27, He says to the Pharisees, "If it is through Beelzebub that I cast out devils, through whom do your own experts cast them out? Let them be your judges then. But if it is through the Spirit of God that I cast devils out, then know that the kingdom of God has overtaken you." Again, in the same vein, He answers John's disciples: "Go back and tell John what you hear and see: the blind see again and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and happy is the man who does not lose faith in me." Mt. 11:4-5. Even a hasty reading of the Gospels reveals that healing was an integral part of the mission and ministry of Jesus.

Jesus passed on to His followers this very same mission. "He called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all devils and to cure diseases and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal." Luke 9:1-3. We see many manifestations of this in the Acts of the Apostles. In fact, in Mark 16:17, Jesus says it is a sign of a believer to heal. "These are the signs that will be associated with believers: In my name they will cast out devils, they will lay their hands on the sick who will recover!" And again in Mark 6:12-13: "So they set off to preach repentance and they cast out many devils, and anointed many sick people with oil and cured them."

Catholics have always believed in healing and healing has always been a mark of God's presence in the Church. During ages of great faith, as in the early Church, it proliferated, but in every age, in one place or another, healing has marked the ministry of great men and women of God. The problem is we know that we are not great men and women of God and we do not expect God to heal through us and so we do not step out in faith to ask. We call ourselves Catholic physicians - Catholic is the adjective which describes the type of physician we claim to be. It says we have certain values and beliefs. Some people would seek out a Catholic physician precisely for this reason - that this doctor would rely not only on his own skills, but upon the power and wisdom of God to use him as an instrument

of healing. Morton Kelsey says, "Physicians would do well to remind themselves that without the Spirit of Jesus, medicine degenerates into depersonalized methodology, and its ethical code becomes a mere legal system. Jesus brings to methods and codes the corrective of love, without which true healing is rarely actually possible."<sup>1</sup>

We are called to "put on the mind of Christ" as Paul tells us in Phil. 2; to bring our attitudes in line with Christ on healing. We are invited to pray in faith for God's healing power to be released in our midst, touching us, touching our patients. Yet, healing is still a mystery. Why is one healed and not another? It is not something magical that happens when we pray in just the right way or when we perform the perfect operation. It is the sovereign act of God with a person, made up of body, soul and spirit. Healing is a sign of the kingdom - the kingdom is here, but not in its fullness and so the whole of creation groans and looks forward to that time when all things will be one in Christ as Paul says in Romans 8: "From the beginning till now the entire creation, as we know it, has been groaning in one great act of giving birth and not only creation, but all of us who possess the first-fruit of the Spirit, we too groan inwardly as we wait for our bodies to be set free."

### **Believe in Healing Power**

Our belief in the healing power of Jesus must be a belief in Him as the One Who gives eternal life - nothing less. Jesus is not someone who merely takes away the aches and pains of our earthly life; He gives us the eternal life. Jesus does not simply give us an indefinite extension of life here and now, postponing death. He gives us life that endures through death. He desires us to be whole - body, soul and spirit - to rise to new life in Him. It seems to me we are so fragmented. We are specialists of the spirit, psychic, or body, or maybe just one part of the body, one area of the psychic, when it is the whole person we are dealing with. One area can not be hurting without the whole person hurting. In Luke 6:39, Jesus says, "Can one blind man guide another? Surely both will fall into a pit!" Likewise, can one who is ill be healing to another? I realize we are all broken healers, but the more we are set free of our brokenness, the more we are healed, and the better instruments of healing we become for others. Our focus needs to change. not that a miracle has been wrought or an operation has been a success, but that a person is healed - "This my brother, my sister has made a step towards wholeness." If our focus is not on the whole person we cannot mend this or that and if God is not present or meaning for life is not there, then that life will not last long. It will be terminated in one way or another!

The full promise of Jesus Christ is a promise of resurrection to eternal life. "It is my Father's will that whoever sees the Son and yes, believes in him shall have eternal life, and I shall raise him up on the last day ... Anyone who eats in my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I shall raise him up on the last day." J. 6.

As Catholic physicians, you are looked upon as ministers of God's healing power - much more so than priests, I might add. I cannot help but believe that if you anointed and prayed with your patients, the effectiveness of your talents and gifts would be raised to new heights. In the epistle of James, he says, "If one of you is ill, he should send for the elders of the church and they must anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord and pray over him. The prayer of faith will save the sick man and the Lord will raise him up again."

You are all elders - you are seen as such by people because of your training and profession. As an elder and as Catholic you are urged to reflect Christ. Paul says in 2, Cor. 3, "And we, with our unveiled faces reflecting like mirrors the brightness of the Lord, all grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image that we reflect. This is the work of the Lord who is Spirit!" This is my prayer for each of us here.

Pope John Paul II, in speaking to a medical group in 1979, said, "Continue with renewed enthusiasm, therefore, beloved sons and daughters, your beneficial action in the service of man. May your daily dedication be a testimony of a reality that transcends you; may Christ Himself bend with you over human suffering to relieve its torment with the balm of hope which only He can give. Be aware of this mission and live its demanding consequences consistently."<sup>2</sup>

God bless you.

#### REFERENCES

1. Kelsey, Morton T., *Healing And Christianity* (1973), p. 52.
2. Pope John Paul II, "On the Health Care Apostolate". *The Ministry of Healing* (1981), p. 3.