



Jesus the Divine Physician

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Abstract

During his earthly life, Jesus was very active in his ministry of healing. He cured the blind, opened the ears of the deaf, and brought the dead back to life. The early Church Fathers gave our Lord the title of “the Divine Physician.” However, Jesus did not cure all disease and sickness once and for all. Instead he asked us to have faith, to renounce sin, with its concomitant morbidity and mortality, and to believe in him. Jesus came to give us a life that will never end, not even with death. The Church and her members have the ongoing task of continuing his healing work in the world of today.

Keywords

faith, health, Jesus, Mission, salvation, sin

I was asked recently to give a talk at the “Forum for Breast Cancer,” held at Makati Medical Center, Manila. Participants included healthcare workers as well as breast cancer patients, survivors, and their relatives and friends. I focused on various aspects of Christ as the Divine Physician and posed various interactive questions to the audience: what did the healing work of Jesus consist of? What is the role of faith in healing? Is it wrong to desire good health?

How to live with sickness? Is there a connection between sin and sickness? What reasons can maintain our hope? The following article is adapted from this talk. Jesus exercised the ministry of healing, and the gospels are littered with examples of him curing the sick: “At sunset, all who had people sick with various diseases brought them to him. He laid his hands on each of them and cured them” (Lk 4:40). As for specialties, we could say his healing work encompassed ophthalmology (opening the eyes of the blind), ENT (curing the deaf), dermatology (healing leprosy), rehabilitation (curing paralysis), hand surgery (healing a withered hand), plastics and reconstruction (repairing a severed ear), neurology (treating a boy with convulsions), critical care (saving the slave of a centurion who was about to die), to name but a few. In his preaching, Jesus refers twice to doctors: “Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do” (Mt 9:12), and “Surely you will quote me this proverb, ‘Physician, cure yourself’” (Lk 4:23).

Faith-Related Healing

The healing episodes were often related to the faith of the person, and at times Jesus could not do great healings because of a lack of faith of the people (see Mk 6:5).

Why was Jesus interested in the faith of the people? Why not just cure everyone and wipe out disease and sickness once and for all? Surely this is what a compassionate God would do? Our questions arise from a desire to live. Jesus comes precisely to fulfill that desire and tells us so. “A thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy; I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (Jn 10:10). This abundant life is not one that only lasts seventy years or eighty if we are strong (see Ps 90:10), but it is eternal life.

Health and Salvation

How can we deepen our understanding of the need for faith in the healings of Jesus? Pope Benedict XVI

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explained it well in an Angelus address on the healing of the ten lepers.

This Sunday's Gospel presents Jesus healing ten lepers, of whom only one, a Samaritan and therefore a foreigner, returned to thank him (see Lk 17:11–19). The Lord said to him: "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well" (Lk 17:19). This Gospel passage invites us to a twofold reflection. It first evokes two levels of healing: one, more superficial, concerns the body. The other deeper level touches the innermost depths of the person, what the Bible calls "the heart", and from there spreads to the whole of a person's life. (Benedict XVI 2007)

I remember during my plastics and reconstructive surgery fellowship training in Sydney, Australia, I saw a young man who slashed his wrist with a desire to commit suicide. After a long operation to reconstruct various tendons and nerves I visited the boy the next morning. I told the boy that we had fixed his hand. He started to cry. I asked him "Why are you crying? The worst part is over. We fixed your hand." He replied "You fixed my hand but who is going to fix my life?"

The young man I saw was in "good" health but he lacked the essential - the desire to live.¹ An operation can cure the superficial wounds, but to heal the deeper wounds, surely the help and grace of Jesus the Good Doctor is needed.

Pope Benedict XVI explains further:

Complete and radical healing is "salvation." By making a distinction between "health" and "salvation", even ordinary language helps us to understand that salvation is far more than health: indeed, it is new, full and definitive life. Furthermore, Jesus here, as in other circumstances, says the words: "Your faith has made you whole." It is faith that saves human beings, re-establishing them in their profound relationship with God, themselves and others; and faith is expressed in gratitude. (Benedict XVI 2007)

Sickness or Health? Ask the Saints

For sure, physical health is a great good and to be desired. Some saints were very sick and prayed for God's intercession to heal them. St Teresa of

Ávila suffered terribly and in her autobiography writes:

So strong were the medicines that after two months I was almost dead, . . . I was in such agony that they feared I might go mad. . . . That night I had an attack which left me insensible for almost four days. They gave me the Sacrament of Extreme Unction, and in every minute of every hour thought that I was dying. They never stopped reciting the Creed to me, as though I could have heard what was said. At times they were so sure that I was dead that afterwards I actually found some wax on my eyelids. . . . For a day and a half, a grave was left open in my convent, waiting for my body; and the rites for the dead were performed at a friary of our Order a short distance away. . . . When I saw myself so paralyzed and still so young, and how the physicians of the world had dealt with me, I decided to invoke those of heaven to heal me. For though I bore my illness most joyfully, I still wanted to get well. But sometimes I reflected that I might regain my health and yet be lost, and that it would be better to stay as I was. But I always thought that I should serve God much better if I recovered. This is our mistake, never to resign ourselves absolutely to what the Lord does, though He knows best what suits us. . . . I took as my lord and advocate the glorious St. Joseph, commending myself earnestly to him. (Teresa of Ávila 1957, 42–6)

St. Alphonsus Liguori, the patron of moral theology in the Catholic Church, discusses sickness in his treatise of 1755 called *Uniformity with God's Will*. Let us consider his wise counsel regarding sickness and health.

- "We ought to make use of the ordinary remedies in time of sickness - such is God's will" (Liguori 1952, no. 4). Here he advises that we should do all in our power to help and heal ourselves.
- "It is not wrong to . . . ask God to free us from our sufferings" (Liguori 1952, no. 4).
- Sometimes we desire health not for love of God but for love of self. "When we find ourselves confined to our sickbed, let us utter this one prayer: "Thy will be done."
- Let us repeat it time and time again and it will please God more than all our mortifications

and devotions. There is no better way to serve God than cheerfully to embrace his holy will” (Liguori 1952, no. 4).

- St. Alphonsus cites an example of a person, who prayed for a cure and when healed asked, “Suppose it would be better for my soul’s salvation if I remained sick, what point then is there in being well?” (Liguori 1952, no. 4). The sickness returned, and the man was happy to accept the will of God.
- “However, if we decide to ask for health, let us do so at least always resigned and with the proviso that our bodily health may be conducive to the health of our soul” (Liguori 1952, no. 4).

Looking at the life and teachings of these two saints, Teresa of Ávila and Alphonsus Liguori, we know that health is a gift but is subordinate to the higher gift of salvation. Good health can be desired and asked for, but if we remain sick, despite doing our part and following the medical advice, we should resign ourselves to do the will of God. The book of Sirach summarizes this advice nicely: “My son, when you are ill, do not delay, but pray to God, for it is he who heals. . . . Then give the doctor his place lest he leave; you need him too, for there are times when recovery is in his hands. He too prays to God that his diagnosis may be correct and his treatment bring about a cure. Whoever is a sinner before his Maker will be defiant toward the doctor” (Sir 38: 9, 13–15). I like to remind the other priests in my community of this verse when they seem to be ignoring my medical advice!

Can Sin Cause Sickness?

A common understanding in biblical times was that a person was sick because of sin. Some biblical accounts in the New Testament blame sickness on demons. How can we interpret or understand this today?

We Should Take Care Not to Attribute All Sickness to Sin

In one biblical episode, Jesus and his disciples came across a man blind from birth. The disciples ask Jesus “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him” (see Jn 9:1-3).

More troubling for us today perhaps is to see how often sickness in biblical times was attributed to demons. The Gospels are scattered with episodes of Jesus healing the sick by casting out their demons. In Matthew’s gospel alone, demons were blamed for muteness (see Mt 9:32), blindness (see Mt 12:22), and what was probable epilepsy (see Mt 17:15). Care should be taken not to directly transpose our current understanding of demons, and medicine, to these episodes. Once I went to consult an orthopedic spine surgeon regarding repeated episodes of back pain which had caused me various troubles accompanied with much anxiety. The brother of the surgeon happened to be a priest, and also the chief exorcist of the Archdiocese of Manila. Following the consultation and the wise words of the spine surgeon, my anxiety dissipated, and I felt a deep peace.

Slightly tongue in cheek, I said to the surgeon “So, it seems like you also have the gift of exorcism and the ability to cast out demons.” He looked at me slightly surprised and replied “Why do you say that? That is my older brother. He is the exorcist.” “Well,” I continued, “when I came into your office, I was plagued by the demon of anxiety, with much concern as to the unpredictability of my back pain and my lack of insight into its cause. However, having listened to your advice, I now feel much peace, as if the demon of anxiety has been expelled.” We both laughed as I told him “so I see it is not only your brother priest who has the gift of expelling demons but you too!”

“Sin” May Contribute to or Cause Sickness

The emergency room on Fridays and Saturdays in the United Kingdom is quasifull of people who are intoxicated with alcohol (which incidentally is also known as “the demon drink”!) They present having fought or fallen or having had a motor vehicle accident, among other causes. Most of the doctors, nurses, and healthcare personnel, having seen so many casualties could testify to the “sinfulness” of alcohol abuse and its effects, as well as the exorbitant cost to the hospital and healthcare system of treating alcohol-induced trauma and sickness. No immediate judgment is implied on the persons who have drunk, but it is also important to name things as they are. We might be inclined to agree with the Psalmist who pronounced that they became sick because of their sins (see Ps 107:17).

Various sicknesses and illnesses may have a sinful root or cause. One of the biggest health issues in the United States today is obesity. There can be various medical solutions proposed. One causative factor should not be ignored: gluttony. This word is

rarely mentioned in both medical (and spiritual circles.) Screwtape, the senior demon, in his letter to his nephew Wormwood, a junior tempter astutely writes “My dear wormwood, the contemptuous way in which you spoke of gluttony as a means of catching souls, in your last letter, only shows your ignorance. One of the great achievements of the last hundred years has been to deaden the human conscience on that subject, so that by now you will hardly find a sermon preached or a conscience troubled about it in the whole length and breadth of Europe” (Lewis 1961, 86).

In the Philippines, there are thirty-five newly diagnosed cases of HIV every day. Of these, twenty-nine occur in men who have sex with men. The sin of lust surely contributes to the high rates of HIV in this group. Other examples could be given but suffice to say that sin has its own morbidity and mortality.²

We will now consider sin at societal level and see how it significantly contributes to sickness. By way of many smaller personal sins, and sins of omission, many societies do not have the healthcare they should have.

The Sin of Lack of Healthcare

Pope Francis noted that “at times families suffer terribly when, faced with the illness of a loved one, they lack access to adequate health care” (Francis 2016, n. 44). The lack of accessible healthcare should be a concern for us all. Sometimes it does not bother us as much as it should. It could be a form of “numbing of conscience” (Francis 2015a, no. 49), and thus there is a call “to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty” (Francis 2015b, no. 15).

I remember meeting a poor man who had a huge facial mass, most likely cancer. He was living in total misery. I went to visit him with some nuns and children to sing Christmas carols and try to bring some joy in the middle of darkness. After the visit, I was invited to a lovely house in a wealthy suburb for what seemed like a banquet. My seatmate at table, a “good” Catholic and regular mass goer, shared how his dog had become sick recently and how he strived to give it the best veterinary care possible even if it had cost a fortune. I could bear it no longer! I launched into an impassioned speech about the lack of healthcare for the poor and how it should challenge us that many poodles got better healthcare than people. I felt so bad after, and I think I gave the poor man indigestion. Later, after the sumptuous chocolate mousse dessert, the man approached me. “Father,” he said “you really provoked my

conscience. It is true what you said, and we need to be reminded of the plight of our poor brothers and sisters.” He gave me \$200 for the MRI scan that was needed. It made me think that we each have a duty, as part of our Christian prophetic mission, to speak out even if at times it can cause indigestion in us and in our listeners.³

Exacerbated by Corruption

One Filipino senator, Alan Peter Cayetano, stated that 6 out of 10 Filipinos die without seeing a doctor and many public hospitals lack equipment and medicines. He linked this situation with corruption: “By cleansing the government of corruption, we will be able to provide our people better and more social services and programs like universal healthcare coverage” (Frialde 2016). Pope Francis had some strong words for those involved in corruption stating that it is a “festering wound,” “a grave sin,” “an evil,” “a sinful hardening of the heart,” and “a work of darkness” (Francis 2016, no. 19).

Structural Sins

Corruption can mean that dedicated government funds never reach the intended hospital or clinic. Instead the money is siphoned off before it arrives. Hospital emergency departments will say they have no budget for necessary medicines, and local clinics cannot offer basic services like disease screening; and all because the allocated funds never arrived. Pope John Paul II wrote that “one cannot easily gain a profound understanding of the reality that confronts us unless we give a name to the root of the evils which afflict us” (John Paul II 1987, no. 36). The name given by Catholic social teaching to such a situation of lack of healthcare is a “structure of sin.” Situations of sin are always rooted in many personal sins as Pope John Paul II explained.

Whenever the Church speaks of situations of sin, or when she condemns as social sins certain situations or the collective behavior of certain social groups, big or small, or even of whole nations and blocs of nations, she knows and she proclaims that such cases of social sin are the result of the accumulation and concentration of many personal sins. It is a case of the very personal sins of those who cause or support evil or who exploit it; of those who are in a position to avoid, eliminate or at least limit certain social

evils but who fail to do so out of laziness, fear or the conspiracy of silence, through secret complicity or indifference; of those who take refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world, and also of those who sidestep the effort and sacrifice required, producing specious reasons of a higher order. The real responsibility, then, lies with individuals. A situation - or likewise an institution, a structure, society itself - is not in itself the subject of moral acts. (John Paul II 1984, no. 16)

Reasons to Hope

I wrap up with some strong reasons to hope in the power of Jesus as Divine Physician and the importance of our collaboration.

We are co-workers. The challenges of health care are great and at times can feel overwhelming, especially when trying to counter the deleterious effects on health care of structural sin. Pope Francis cautions us “the battle against evil is a long and hard one; it requires patience and endurance” (Francis 2013). We should remember that it is Christ’s mission and not ours. We are not the Messiah! He is the Good Doctor—we are just his assistants and should try not to get in the way too much. “We are God’s co-workers” (1 Cor 3:9) as St Paul reminds us.

Give life to the body. When someone arrives at the emergency room badly injured from multiple gunshot wounds for example, medical personnel have to get access to the veins. Once they get access to the body, they can give fluids, blood, and all the medicines needed. Rev. Jaime Bonet shared that as the injection in the vein of the arm strengthens the entire body, just so the life that passes through only one soul heals the whole Church (see Bonet 1999, 544). How much good can pass through one docile soul! This should give us reasons to hope. This is a beautiful and encouraging analogy for all of us! Our Lord can give so much life through a healthcare worker who remains united to him (see Jn 15:4–5).

*All shall be well*⁴. Where the situation seems beyond us we do well to remember the reassuring words that our Lord addressed to Dame Julian of Norwich—“All shall be well.” When we see wounded realities around us in the body of Christ, we should always remember to ask Jesus, the Head, what he wants for his body. After all he is the Good Doctor and has the remedy – the medicine of his love

for all the ailments in his body.⁵ Christ himself gives value to each and every act of kindness and goodness done to a patient. After all he is present in each one of them as he explained saying “I was ill and you cared for me” (see Mt 25:36).

Continuing his mission. Jesus the Divine Physician desires to continue his same mission of healing in the world of today. The *Catechism* explains “The Lord Jesus Christ, physician of our souls and bodies, who forgave the sins of the paralytic and restored him to bodily health, has willed that his Church continue, in the power of the Holy Spirit, his work of healing and salvation, even among her own members” (*Catechism* 1997, no. 1421). Our Lord wants to continue stretching out his healing hands to touch, bless and cure the sick. In fact, the etymology of the word “surgeon” is “one who works with his or her hands.” We are his healing hands, as the song attributed to the prayer of St Teresa of Ávila reminds us: “Christ has no hands on earth but yours.” We can all continue to reach out a helping hand to cure the spiritual and moral ailments of our brothers and sisters. In this way, we continue to assist Jesus, the Divine Physician, in his ongoing mission of healing and giving life to the world of today.

Notes

1. This paradox is also sadly noted in countries such as Japan, with technologically advanced healthcare systems but consistently high suicide rates. In 2015, around 24,000 Japanese people took their own lives; the first time in 18 years that the number of suicides fell below 25,000 (Japan Today 2016).
2. An interesting exercise would be to take the seven deadly sins in turn (pride, anger, lust, envy, greed, gluttony, and laziness) and see in what way each contributes and/or causes sickness and illness. Perhaps this could be the inspiration for a future article.
3. Rev. Jaime Bonet, the founder of the *Fraternidad Misionera Verbum Dei* community, has been known to advise young missionaries in formation to beware of speakers and speeches that only produce in the audience a “Wow!” of amazement and never an “Ow!” of *metanoia* and change.
4. The Catholic Church recognizes the wisdom of Mother Julian of Norwich, quoting her writings in its *Catechism* (see *Catechism* 1997, no. 313).
5. St Ignatius of Antioch, in his letter to the Church of Ephesus, wrote that the Eucharist is the medicine of immortality.

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