

THE PRACTICE OF HEALING PRAYER

A HOW-TO GUIDE FOR CATHOLICS

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Prayer for healing depends upon the gift of faith. We need to believe that God has the power to heal through our prayers. But just as having the gift of faith is important, it is also important for us to have a reasonable foundation upon which to base our healing practice. I believe we can base our healing prayer on Scripture, tradition, and our own human experience.

- Sacred Scripture encourages us to pray for healing.
- Catholic tradition also encourages us to pray.
- Our human experience backs up our belief in the effectiveness of healing prayer with real evidence of healing that actually happens when we pray.

SACRED SCRIPTURE

Over and over in the gospels, we read that Jesus encouraged his followers to pray with expectant faith for the sick. When we read the New Testament, we become aware of how great a part healing prayer plays in the gospel story. St. Luke, in particular, tells us all kinds of healing stories.

Right at the beginning of Luke, we read how the archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that she must name her son Jesus (Luke 1:31) because his very name means “God heals” or “God saves.” Jesus was his only name and was meant to signify his mission in life. (“Christ”—meaning the “anointed one”—is his title and not his last name.) And so, whenever we say the name of

Jesus, we are reaffirming our belief that his primary mission is to heal us.

When Jesus first began his public ministry, he stood up in the synagogue of his hometown of Nazareth and began reading from the prophet Isaiah and then applied the prophecy to himself:

. . . he has anointed me
to bring the good news to the afflicted.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives,
sight to the blind
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord.
(Luke 4:18-19)

Immediately after proclaiming these words, Jesus acted on them by going out and actually healing the sick and casting out evil spirits:

At sunset all those who had friends suffering from diseases of one kind or another brought them to him, and laying his hands on each he cured them.
(Luke 4:40)

Then Luke tells us many individual stories describing how Jesus healed the sick. As a result of people witnessing his healing powers, Jesus is overwhelmed by the crowds of suffering people who are chasing after him. Moved by

compassion, he tells his followers to pray to the “Lord of the harvest to send out laborers to his harvest” (Matthew 9:37). Jesus needs help!

A little later, however, Jesus answers his own prayer for help by choosing the twelve apostles, with whom he shares his very own mission by bestowing on them his divine power and authority to cure disease (Luke 9:1). These simple, uneducated followers then set out and, two by two, go from “village to village proclaiming the good news and healing everywhere” (9:6).

Notice how significant this commissioning was: Jesus did not emphasize how different he was from us but instead shared the very same extraordinary divine power he possessed with ordinary people. His followers were not priests or scholars or elders; they were the blue-collar workers of his day, as it were.

We may be tempted to think: “St. Peter and the other apostles were the founders of the Church, and they are out of my league.” The twelve apostles were unique, but that’s no excuse for us to avoid healing the sick ourselves. In fact, in the very next chapter, Jesus chooses another seventy-two followers, whose names we don’t even know, and tells them also to cure the sick:

Whenever you go into a town where they make you welcome, eat what is set before you. Cure those in it who are sick, and say, “The kingdom of God is very near to you.” (Luke 10:8-9)

Everything in the gospels encourages us—even orders us—to pray for the sick. Here are Jesus' own words:

Until now you have not asked anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and so your joy will be complete. (John 16:24)

It is truly astounding that whenever the sick approach Jesus and ask for healing, Jesus responds by making them well. We have no record of Jesus ever refusing to heal someone.

The extraordinary thing is that Jesus is never recorded as having told a sick person (as we might be tempted to do) that God was testing that person in order to teach him patience. Instead, we always read that Jesus healed the one who asked. Sickness is not seen as a blessing in disguise but as a curse. The gospels encourage us to pray for sickness to go away.

Jesus talks about the way human parents feel when their children are sick: “Is there anyone among you who would hand his son a stone when he asked for bread?” (Matthew 7:9) As a human father, I know that I want my children to get well when they are sick and suffering. I still remember when our children would fall seriously ill. We would get up in the middle of the night, I would put the child in Judith's arms, and we would immediately drive to the nearest hospital. Here Jesus is saying, “How much *more* will your Father in heaven” bless you when you ask

(7:11, emphasis added). God is far more loving than any parent. He is not going to put coal in our stocking.

The Book of Acts describes the early history of the Church and shows that after Jesus' death and resurrection, the Church continued his healing mission. God continued to work miracles because the Church was simply Jesus continuing his healing work, only now it was multiplied by thousands of Christians, and through them—and through us—Jesus is still healing the sick.

It happened that Publius' father was in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him, and after a prayer he laid his hands on the man and healed him. When this happened, the other sick people on the island also came and were cured. (Acts 28:8-9)

It is only in Acts and the letters of St. Paul that we read not only about the sick being healed but also about some Christians who were not healed. For instance, Paul talks about a revolting sickness that he himself suffered for some time:

You have never been unfair to me; indeed you remember that it was an illness that first gave me the opportunity to preach the gospel to you, but though my illness was a trial to you, you did not show any distaste or revulsion; instead, you welcomed me as

a messenger of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. (Galatians 4:12-14)

And then there is Paul's famous "thorn in the flesh":

Wherefore, so that I should not get above myself, I was given a thorn in the flesh, a messenger from Satan to batter me and prevent me from getting above myself. About this, I have three times pleaded with the Lord that it might leave me; but he has answered me, "My grace is enough for you: for power is at full stretch in weakness." It is, then, about my weaknesses that I am happiest of all to boast, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me; and that is why I am glad of weaknesses, insults, constraints, persecutions and distress for Christ's sake. For it is when I am weak that I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

There is, by the way, no evidence here that the "thorn" was necessarily a disease or physical ailment. In the Old Testament, a thorn such as the one described in this passage refers to a wounding human relationship, and so this "thorn" could very well have been a person who drove Paul crazy. The key thing to note is that Paul automatically assumed that he was supposed to pray to get rid of the "thorn." It was only when it didn't disappear (after Paul had prayed three times to remove it) that he

was puzzled, and so he prayed to find out what he was supposed to do next.

Then a few lines later, Paul defends his record as an apostle by calling our attention to the miracles that regularly follow his work: “All the marks characteristic of a true apostle have been at work among you: complete perseverance, signs, marvels, demonstrations of power” (2 Corinthians 12:12).

Paul boasts in long, passionate passages about his suffering, but he doesn’t boast about his physical sickness, the kind of sickness that comes from the body’s falling apart from within. If we follow Jesus, we know that we will certainly suffer, just as Jesus did. And yet we never think about him being sick, do we? Throughout the gospels, we are encouraged to pray for the sick as well as to visit them.

“If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it” (John 14:14). If we really believe this, how can we justify not praying to heal our sick brothers and sisters who suffer in our fallen world?

OUR CATHOLIC TRADITION

For some reason, Catholics have gotten the impression that praying for healing is a Protestant practice rather than its being at the very heart of our own tradition. To the contrary, the Protestant reformer (and founder of the Presbyterians), John Calvin, wanted to rid Europe of the Catholic healing shrines because he believed they

were a Catholic superstition. In general, most mainline Protestant denominations (such as Episcopalian, Baptist, and Presbyterian) do not teach healing prayer. This is also true for the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, the Southern Baptists. The healing services we often see on television are led mostly by independent Pentecostals, and most of our impressions of an active healing ministry have been formed by viewing such programs.

Back in the 1970s, I was interviewed on Australian TV and was asked, “Do you really think that a priest should be a ‘faith healer’?” Being considered a “faith healer” usually implies that you are somehow a fraud, making money off the gullible. My response to the interviewer was that, to the contrary, I thought something had really gone wrong when a Catholic priest did not pray to heal the sick. “It goes with the territory,” I added. We might ask in response whether Jesus himself should be considered a “faith healer.”

But now, thanks be to God, we are seeing the beginnings of a great change throughout the United States and the world. We now see some priests who pray for healing and who are known for conducting healing services, usually connected with a celebration of the Eucharist. Fifty years ago such healing Masses were unheard of.

What we Catholics are coming to realize is that praying for healing is an essential part of our own tradition and goes way back—to the very beginning.¹

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).²

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.