

# What if I get sick?

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## *Pain and suffering and answers from our faith*

*By Fr. Dave Heney*

***When the doctor says you have a serious illness, you might have a lot of questions. What will become of me? Can I face this illness? Will I ever get better? How will my family react? Who will be with me during this difficult time? Why is this happening to me now! And perhaps most important ...where is God in all this?***

Suffering, sickness, pain, and sorrow; these difficult events will eventually come to all of us at some point in our life, if not already, and to some more than others. While it is difficult to compare one person's suffering with another, we will all eventually face some kind of difficult physical challenge. It is a natural consequence of having a human body in an imperfect world that can break down and suffer the onslaught of disease, trauma, crisis, and injury.

We should understand what happens in sickness and how to face it well. God feels the same way and our faith can help. It is no accident that when you walk into any Catholic Church anywhere in the world that the largest object you often see is an image of a human person like you suffering on a cross. How we face and overcome sickness and suffering is clearly central to our Catholic faith. After all, our faith is useless unless it is useful. We believe the answer will be found in the authentic experience of Jesus.

## **What happens when we get sick?**

Sickness can cause serious physical, mental, social, and spiritual effects that can be devastating to us and our family. Let's take a closer look at what happens when we get sick.

At first, we might feel the subjective experience of pain, either physically from some bodily symptom or emotionally from what a doctor tells us about an illness we might not yet even feel but we know is coming with dire effects. Both are painful. Both can also lead to mental suffering as we imagine the consequences of our illness; leaving loved ones, suffering financial hardship, or even possible physical deformities. We might also feel despair as we recognize this sickness might not go away for some time and so will drastically change our normal daily routine and relationships with loved ones.

The shock of major changes to our life can lead to anxiety and fear, and both as a jumble of emotions that can produce a deep depression and sadness at our lot in life. This first experience of illness can be devastating.

Finally, sickness can lead to spiritual crisis, perhaps questioning God's role in all of this; especially if we feel we have lived a good life. Many people take this downturn in health quite personally and ask, "Why is God doing this to me ...and why now! What have I done so wrong to deserve this?" Some might even feel betrayed by a God they have served faithfully for so long, only now to suffer some devastating illness. Is this fair? Why is God not living up to His side of the deal; that if we have lived well ...*we should be blessed with good health?*

In general, the experience of sickness is the experience of "loss." We have lost the good health and life that we once had, and no longer have our daily routine, our normal schedule, and our much longed-for connections with those we love. On a deeper level, we have lost, perhaps, a familiar and comfortable way of understanding our relationship with God. Has God now abandoned me? What was once a healthy and happy life is now gone, and we long for the days when we were healthy and fully alive with our family, friends ...and God.

## Feeling alone in sickness

Sickness also reveals a profoundly personal experience that only we can feel. Only we can feel our own pain. No one else can ever experience or feel our pain as precisely as we feel it ourselves. Others can guess, empathize, intuit, or sympathize, but they can never actually feel what we do as we feel our own pain. *Our experience of our own pain is the most personal of all human events.*

Precisely at the time when we most want to connect with others about what is going on within us we discover that others cannot ever really know. That can be frustrating as we try to explain our experience over and over again to our doctor, friends and family. But no amount of words can ever transfer our experience to someone else. While modern medical devices can accurately take our blood pressure and detailed pictures of our internal structures and precisely measure temperature, no medical machine can ever assess *our personal experience* of pain, and no amount of words can transfer what we feel inside to other people so that they might actually know. Our loved ones can never experience our subjective experience of suffering. If we cry out, "No one knows how I feel!" Well, that is actually a *true statement* ... and no one ever can.

That is why it is difficult to compare the suffering and pain that people experience in sickness. For some, a minor ache lays them low while others can endure major trauma quite calmly. Pain is a profoundly personal challenge that we must face alone, because no other person can actually feel our pain just as we do. It is the one human experience that is truly our own project, our own kind of personal "possession," and our own personal event about which we must decide how to respond.

This is where our faith comes in. In our human experience of suffering, it is true that only God truly knows what we feel. That truth just may be the beginning of the path that leads to our healing and strength. But first, let us take a look at how sickness was experienced in the past.

## Ancient Romans & Christians: Why do we get sick?

In the ancient world, every event had to have a cause by some personal agent, whether a human being or a god. Nothing ever just “happened” by itself. If an event did not have an obvious human cause, like storms, earthquakes, or sickness, then only the gods were to blame. Therefore, sick people believed these events and especially their sickness was a message from the gods that signaled some disfavor. Ancient people did not have our modern medical understanding of germs, or infection, or natural causes of illness, although they seemed to have a vague idea that sickness was contagious and so they would be afraid to be near you. So in the Greco-Roman world, if you were sick the gods must not like you and so your family would leave you alone too, *just as you deserved*. Consequently, and tragically, many sick people died from that simple neglect.

Christians did not have any more sophisticated medical understanding of illness than the Greeks or Romans, but they certainly did not believe sickness was sent from any pagan gods. They were instead guided by the example of Jesus who never feared touching those who were sick in order to heal them. *Jesus loved people* no matter what, *in sickness and in health*, so His followers did the same. If Christian family members were sick, their family did not abandon them but tenderly cared for them despite the evident dangers of contagion they knew were present. *Despite these evident dangers nothing would stop them from courageously caring for those they compassionately loved.* (They followed Jesus closely!)

They knew that Jesus came to Bethlehem with full knowledge of the dangerous world into which He was born, and that nothing would stop Him from coming to the people He loved. He arrived in Bethlehem, not as a powerful warlord to fight the Roman Army, but instead as a vulnerable child, who would die unless people cared for Him! God designed us to naturally come to the aid of an innocent and defenseless child, and for any sick family member. Jesus returned us to our God-given character of courageous compassion for those in need.

Naturally, a good number of Christian sick people at this time survived due to that simple tender loving care they received. Romans ironically noticed that more Christians survived and so naively concluded that Christians were somehow especially blessed by their God since so many more of their sick family members lived. We now know that these Christian “cures” were simply due to devout Christian families continued loving care for their loved ones that arose from their deep faith to follow the example of Our Lord. That love instilled steadfast courage and amazing compassion which ensured they would never abandon their family members who were sick. It is amazing what love can do!

## Sickness in Perspective: Connecting Dots

Life was much more difficult in these ancient times, although in an interesting way, people then did not actually know it! Ancient people experienced suffering on a daily basis as the *normal way that things are*. For example, in ancient times over 50% of children did not survive to the age of five, and life after that was a daily grind of subsistence living, dire poverty,

frequent plagues, harvest failures, warfare, violence, and political oppression. Since hardship was the norm, occasional happy moments stood out in high relief, such as successful births, loving marriages, and good harvests, and so these happy events would be remembered with more intensity. Because these relatively happy events stood out in contrast against the normal drudgery, it was these few happy stand-out moments in retrospect that would be the *dots that people would connect* when describing their life.

God designed our human brain in an evolutionary process to highlight what *stands out* in contrast to normal routine, and if hardship is the routine then ancient people would actually remember these few happy events more, making their lives to be, well ... generally happy!

Ironically, it is the opposite today for many people. We generally have most things go fairly well in our life today with, in all fairness, only occasional setbacks. Normalcy is the new norm. Today, we have cars, homes, clothing, supermarkets, shopping malls, pharmacies, heating and air-conditioning, refrigerators, cell phones, televisions, iPads, computers, and the very latest in modern 21<sup>st</sup> century technology medicine available for us. If you are sick you can have MRI's, CT Scans, PET Scans, EKG's, X-Rays, and all the latest pain-killing drugs. We have a global economy that can bring medical products from the world to our door and at a good price too. We have a lot going on that is good. Therefore, we tend to notice the relatively rare setbacks so much more, and if we choose to connect only those negative dots, we can unfortunately say that our life is, of all things ...not going well. We should be careful about which dots we choose to connect! It can make a big difference in how we face our illness.

This does not diminish in any way the seriousness and gravity and pain of the illness you truly feel, but it does help put in perspective how you might face it. If we get sick, we certainly *do not want to forget all the other areas of our life that are going well*. That would not be fair.

One blessing we have is that we live in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and in the United States, and have access to the highest technological levels of medical care ever available in human history, involving the latest machines, medications, and procedures that would have been considered truly miraculous only a few decades ago. It is simply not accurate or fair to forget this!

Again, it is truth that will set us free (*John 8:32*) and it is simply true that while we might have to suffer an illness now, we still have many other blessings in our life intact. We must not lose sight of those while we still must face our illness with a realistically clear and healthy outlook.

## **Science and Catholics Today: Why Do We Get Sick?**

As Catholics, we believe that God never “sends” pain or sickness to us as some kind of test or punishment for our sins. God wants only our happiness so how does this happen in a world where sickness occurs. How does this happen when even Jesus who was perfectly innocent and yet suffered immense pain on the cross? We need to understand this one step at a time.

First, Catholics understand that pain and sickness have *natural* causes that may be due to

human causes, like the Romans who crucified Our Lord, or environmental events, like toxic chemicals and germs in the atmosphere. Scientific knowledge is still evolving, so it is difficult to say which illnesses are solely caused by unhealthy human behaviors, such as smoking, drug addiction, or overeating, and which are caused by environmental factors, such as chemical emissions, or even some toxic combination of both. In addition, our sickness could be the result of inherited genetic traits that were naturally deposited in our DNA generations ago by our ancestors and are only now being activated by some unknown trigger, much to our dismay.

Any or all of these environmental, genetic, historic, and personal behaviors can produce natural chemical reactions in our body, some of which are healthy while some are not. We cannot ignore the natural consequences of chemicals doing what they normally do, no matter what their cause or origin. We live in a world that is still chemically evolving and so we may sometimes suffer the consequences of that chemical evolution. Who knows today how many illnesses are the consequences of the unbelievably complex mix of chemicals loose in our environment today, inherited from our ancestors, or that we have taken in to our body by abnormal nutrition, or drug abuse, or have received from a contagious sick person. The reason why we are sick may never be known.

*While it may be difficult today to know just why we are sick right now, we can precisely know how to respond to it.*

Therefore, we should have a clear understanding about what resources are in our control and which are not, what is our responsibility, and what might just be an unfortunate accident of the environment in which we live or the ancestors from whom we have inherited dangerous genes. Jesus speaks precisely about this issue of personal responsibility in the Gospel.

Jesus mentions a tower in Galilee that suddenly collapses and tragically kills 18 people (*Luke 13:22*). That tragic event would certainly have been understood in the ancient world as something those 18 people deserved as an act of God's justice toward them, i.e. God *caused* the building to collapse on them because they were bad people in some way. In other words *...they had it coming!* However, Jesus clearly indicates it was only an accident, due only to a badly built tower! The tragic loss of 18 lives is the fault of the tower builder, and not God, or those 18 people. The Gospel account means to "depersonalize" accidents that, after all, were caused by human error. Towers naturally fall when they are not built well. *God will not repeal the law of gravity if people choose to build a tower that cannot stand up properly!* If you build a tower badly it will eventually fall down.

There is nothing personal in that, or any message beyond the natural consequence of the unvarying law of gravity, just as God created. In the same way, He will not repeal the natural consequences of chemical reactions in our body that might arise from behaviors that harm us, such as bad nutrition, lack of exercise, or substance abuse, or environmental factors, even if we don't fully understand them yet, and which may not even be our fault, but are still natural. He will not repeal the laws of heredity either, that may cause mutations in our genetic code that were initiated years ago from our ancestors but might still cause damage to us today.

We must recognize that we do not live in an already perfectly formed world. We believe that God continues to create our world, with natural events like violent earthquakes, volcanoes, tornadoes, and hurricanes, along with mutating germs and diseases. These earth-changing events create beautiful places like Yosemite Valley and mutating germs that produce evolutionary effects that slowly change our bodies. These are all natural events that simply do what they naturally do. If we live on a million year old earthquake fault or contact a rapidly mutating virus, we cannot be shocked that these natural events continue to take place where we now live. We need more than ever to think clearly about this.

## **What is good mental health? *The truth will set us free (John. 8:32)***

*Sickness is a time when we especially need to think clearly, as weak as we might feel. This is not the time to let our emotions carry us away with anxiety. We need to stay connected to what is true if we are to make our way through our present health crisis. John 8:32 should be our guide, "The truth will set you free."*

God designed our mind to accurately connect with the world as it truly is. It does not help to distort reality in ways that we would prefer, but rather to see our situation as it actually is. *Good mental health is simply opening my eyes to accurately see what is actually going on in my life, both the good and the bad.*

That means we take an unbiased and critical look at the impact of our physical habits, like nutrition, exercise, and sleep, our personal habits of either optimism or pessimism at how we view events, our environmental and inheritance effects that affect our health, and finally even our spiritual ideas that influence our faith, and decide to open our eyes to see the possible effects of each of these on our overall health. We must never be afraid of seeing the truth of our situation. It is always "Good News" in that we at least know what it is we are facing and can do something about it. It is what we do not know that will hurt us!

We may not have too much control over environmental and hereditary factors, but there are many personal habits, behaviors, thoughts, and spiritual ideas that we do have total control over no matter what our sickness. There is a still lot that we can do! Now is the time to start.

*We have the power to choose how we think about our situation. After all, it is not our sickness or medical procedures that may be frightening but how we choose to think about them that makes them so. For example, at first glance, hospitals, CT Scans, operations, and medications might seem alien and intrusive, but think how miraculous and wonderful they would have seemed only a few years ago. We live today with the best medical healthcare ever devised ...ever! Machines like CT Scans and PET Scans that never even touch you can take accurate images of you to produce an accurate understanding and correct diagnosis. Wouldn't you want that? You can be grateful that you have access to the very latest medical technology ever seen in the history of the world! You can choose to see these procedures as your "friends" that help assess, diagnose, and possibly cure your sickness. Why not cooperate with your medical staff!*

Fear can come from not knowing our situation but accurate knowledge can bring a sense of personal power, so we should learn as much as we can about our sickness and the different treatments for it, perhaps getting second opinions too. As always, *you want to stay with what you truly know for sure about your situation and not jump to conclusions, or panic, or let your imagination run wild.* You are a unique person and so what might have happened to others with this illness may not happen to you. Stay with the known facts about your own case.

Remember that God designed our body to operate in a certain way, with the right food, the right exercise, the right thoughts, the right faith, and the right amount of sleep. Why fight His plan? Why not cooperate as best as you can with what He has already laid out as the way to good health as He designed? You can choose to be a good “doctor” to yourself! That is good mental health.

## **Why Doesn't God Stop People Who Cause Suffering?**

God is just as sad as we are whenever He sees those He created to be loving and kind freely choose to do evil and hurt others, like build a bad tower, or manufacture faulty products, or behave in criminal ways that hurt people. Even His own Son was an innocent victim of freely chosen acts of evil. God created us free so that we can CHOOSE to love, no matter what is happening to us.

*Freedom is the essence of love, and His very purpose in creating the world and us. Without freedom there is no love, and love is the true source of our happiness ...in sickness and in health.*

For example, I certainly appreciate it more when someone is kind and loving to me because they freely *choose to be kind and loving* as opposed to someone who has to do so, or is kind because they want something from me. God freely loves us and wants us to freely love in return, so *He cannot take away our free will.* We must be able to freely choose to do what is good, which means, unfortunately, that we must also have the option of freely choosing evil behavior that ultimately brings so much suffering into the world.

*If God were to prevent all evil in the world and force us to only do good things, our good acts would not be done out of love. What is “good” about that!*

Because there is both evil and good before us, we have a choice. If there were no suffering in the world, then no one would be able to freely choose compassion and courage. Suffering actually teaches both courage and compassion, and enables us to unite with others and to rescue and comfort them ...unlike those ancient Roman families!

Wisdom comes from suffering. It teaches the perspective to value things and people more deeply. We learn what is important in life and what is not. If everything in the world went perfectly, we would never learn wisdom.

Sickness also reveals our mortality; that our life will end all our connections with our loved ones. That brutal fact teaches us to use our days well and not waste them. The presence of suffering and death actually teaches us to live a fuller, joyful, and more meaningful life. No one should ever ask for suffering, but if it does come, we know how to face it from the example of Our Lord. His way led through crucifixion to resurrection. If we follow Him we will rise as well. Jesus knew that God did not “send” His suffering as any message of disfavor, nor did Jesus take His good health earlier as a sign of God’s favor.

*It is important to know why we get sick but much more important to know how to respond. That is what defines our character as Christian.*

## **Responses from Our Friends and Family When We Get Sick**

We want to respond in a healthy way to our sickness; with clarity of thinking unobscured by superstition. We should get a hold of our thoughts as mature Christians to face our illness because, ironically, one of the greatest challenges can come from those who love us most.

When you get sick, family and friends might rush to your side to console you with words of comfort. That is always a good thing! We should always feel grateful for their sincere efforts and thank them for it. They often ask, “How are you doing? How do you feel today? Is there anything I can do for you? Please call me if you need any help!” That compassionate attentiveness is our 2000 year old Catholic heritage that impressed the Romans so much.

That outpouring of help is a good thing but can also have an unintended consequence that certainly no loved one ever intends. All of these well intentioned offers of help by sincerely loving and caring people can inadvertently cause, certainly without their ever intending it, an experience of, well ... *gradual self-absorption in our self*.

It can accidentally lead us to think that our illness is the most important thing going on. After all, what else do we hear our loved ones talk about except about our illness? When every conversation centers on our situation, what else might we conclude? Our sickness must be the most important event going on!

Besides their comments, our own experience of pain can do the same. For example, if we accidentally hit our thumb with a hammer while nailing a picture on the wall, our experience of pain can make everything else around us seem to actually disappear, as we sharply focus only on the intensity of the pain coming from our throbbing thumb. That intensely felt pain can make us become completely self-absorbed in only that pain filled thumb. Self-absorption can never be an answer to pain and suffering. It only makes our situation worse as we focus more and more on our own pain. That should be the last thing we want to happen!

How we react to illness reveals our character. It is to the example of Christ is where we should look for guidance.

## How did Jesus respond to pain and suffering?

First of all, Jesus knew the difference between pain and suffering. Pain is the immediate experience of physical or mental discomfort, such as hitting our thumb with a hammer or receiving a serious diagnosis. Every animal, from dogs to elephants, can feel the immediate experience of physical pain but only human beings can experience that unique feeling of suffering, which is different from just the physical experience of pain. Suffering is a uniquely human event in which we place our physical and mental pain in a larger context of meaning.

What does it mean to give an event “meaning?” Simply put, we give any event meaning when we place it in some larger context. *This was the goal of everything Jesus ever said and did.*

For example, look at these common but difficult daily challenges; a tough job, rush hour traffic, a hostile workplace, or long hours at work. These can be painful events, but can also derive deeper meaning when we see them in a larger context; that they provide for our deeply loved family and ensure their prosperity and happiness. We endure traffic and work so that they might enjoy a better life. That larger meaning can lessen the subjective experience of pain of our early morning rise and the challenges at work. In fact, the more we love our family the more we are eager to face any challenge! We do whatever it takes to ensure their happiness because we love them. Without love, these painful experiences are, well, *meaningless*.

Have you ever noticed how many people have pictures of their family at their place of work, on their desk or someplace nearby? They remind them why they are enduring the very challenges at work in the first place! Gazing at those images of family reminds them of why they endure such hardship. They face every difficult challenge precisely because they love their family in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health!

That sacrifice becomes a source of tremendous joy and meaning; when we know that we are caring for those we love despite very real challenges like traffic, our job, a bad boss, or illness. Our ultimate happiness comes from this kind of commitment, in sickness or in health, rather than our happiness depending only on our health. Our sacrifice for our loved ones has a noble purpose, which *transforms* the sacrifices we make.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus directly faced a very painful crucifixion (hence the term *excruciating* pain). He asked His Father, “if possible...let this chalice pass.” In other words, He asked to let this crucifixion not happen at all! That is a reasonable prayer that we can pray ourselves about our own sickness. We should pray for deliverance from suffering as He did. Like Our Lord, we would rather not suffer, because *no one should ever seek suffering*. But if it comes we know how to respond because of His example. Jesus knew that the larger context and meaning of His actions would lead to the salvation of all mankind, and so He finished His prayer in the Garden by saying, “Not my will but yours be done!” He would love us no matter what, *in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health*.

He would bring the unconditional love of God to us no matter what evil people did to Him, or the hardship He would face. He knew His love would ultimately change the world for the better so He was able to endure the short term pain of the crucifixion, as terrible as it was, in favor of the eternal promise of salvation. He would place His immediate suffering in the larger context of salvation for the whole world. *Something greater would come from His crucifixion on that Friday afternoon.*

As His disciples, we follow Jesus in every way. This is the key teaching on suffering that Jesus reveals. *Our life is about love whether we are sick or not. That is where true happiness is found.*

This is what it means when people advise us to “Offer our suffering up to God” We join our sufferings to those of Christ in His offering of Himself to His Father in Heaven. Because of our sickness we may not have great mobility, or be bed-ridden, or have little strength, but let us keep our thoughts together and continue to pray, not only for our own health, but for others too, and that always God’s will is done.

## **The way Jesus arrives, lives, and leaves reveals His answer**

At Bethlehem, He courageously comes to a very dangerous place, to people who cannot find happiness, to bring a message of courageous compassion no matter what challenges He must face, in sickness and in health.

At Calvary, Jesus was still fulfilling His mission to love on the cross right in the face of His executioners! He never stopped loving us despite the cross.

- “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”
- “This day you will be with me in paradise.”
- “Mother, here is your son. Son, here is your mother.”

In Our Life, we were baptized to offer our lives, *all that we have*, to change and transform the world for the better. We offer our lives in courageous compassion for the good of others, both in sickness and in health. We affirm sickness is never a sign of God’s disfavor just as health is not a sign of His favor. Both are “*what we have*” and so are to be used for some good.

At Every Mass, Jesus affirms that I must use what I have for the good of others. The Mass is an event that adds value or transforms things at many levels. For example, we do not consecrate wheat and grapes at Mass. We take wheat and grapes and add value to them by making them into bread and wine, as the Offertory Prayer affirms they are the “work of human hands.” Then Jesus adds value by transforming them into His Body and Blood, given to us for our happiness. Then we ourselves become added value and are transformed by receiving it. Finally, the world receives added value and is transformed by our loving actions in it after Mass.

(The very name “Mass” comes from the Latin word “missa” the final word the priest speaks at Mass, which means “You are sent!.” We are sent into the world to bring His love to others no matter what is going on with us.)

However, besides the bread and wine that we place on the altar, we also place our own gifts as well to be transformed. What is it that we would like to be transformed into something better? If what I have in my life right now is sickness, then that is what “I have” and so I must also place that sickness on the altar, so that God can transform it into something good for the world as well. If what I have in my life is good health, or intelligence, or talents, or special abilities, or personal characteristics, then I must also place those on the altar so that God can transform them into something good for the world as well.

The words of transformation (consecration) that Jesus speaks at Mass are “This is my body and blood, given for you.” If my body is sick in some way or even perfectly healthy, I still offer it and give it to others in a way that will help them, just as Jesus does at Mass with His own body and blood that He has. I offer myself in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad.

My illness or my good health does not change my overall Christian mission to take what I have and use it for some good in the world. Sickness is not a sign of God’s disfavor just as health is not a sign of God’s favor. Both are simply “what I have” or “the work of human hands” and so are to be transformed and used for some good in the world, in sickness or in health.

Both were aspects of His life that Jesus “had.” They were what He offered to His father in Heaven. This is the fulfillment of the words of consecration He first said at the Last Supper, “This is my body and blood, given for you,” We offer ourselves in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health.

He will do this because He loves us and has compassion for us in our human situation. He will do this with courage even though it would lead to His crucifixion.

## **Mortal Sickness: when we face the end of our life**

Mortal sickness is a different experience from a sickness where we hope to recover. Here there is no recovery, and this sickness will end our life and all our human connections.

Here we can exercise whatever strength we have left caring for those left behind, making arrangements for our estate, taking care of loved ones, reconciling where we need to reconcile, and declaring accurately our final healthcare directives. We can still use our final moments for the good of others, just as our faith calls us to do throughout our life. But in this time of mortal weakness, there is only so much we can do for them. We have to entrust them to the grace of God that they will be all right after we are gone. This can be a profoundly meaningful moment that is unique to a person facing their own death. If finally recognized and fully accepted, it can bring a profound sense of peace that others often just do not see.

I have often noticed that people around a sick person often take the news of mortal illness so much harder than the sick person themselves! Very often, the sick person has already made peace with their own mortality while family and friends have not. After all, when you face your own mortality you recognize that your illness is something only you can face and either fight or accept. Others just cannot know what it is like to feel what you feel.

Our Catholic faith affirms that we do not have to use “*extraordinary means*” to prolong our life if we are on an irreversible path towards death. All medical procedures, medications, operations, and interventions may be withdrawn, either by you, if fully conscious and aware, or by those to whom you have granted authority. You can let nature take its course. Food and water are not considered extraordinary or “*medicine*” and so should not be withdrawn, unless nutrition serves only to feed a cancerous tumor that has taken over an entire person. However, pain killers and all palliative care for your comfort should always continue. This is a complicated issue so we should take the time now to understand them well, and not later when we are sick.

**Excellent resources for further information are at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops website at [usccb.org/issues and action/ Human Life and Dignity/ End of Life](http://usccb.org/issues_and_action/Human_Life_and_Dignity/End_of_Life).**

## **The Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick**

This sacrament provides special grace and strength to those who are seriously sick. All seven sacraments are both personal and public events where we meet the Lord in a very tangible way. The tangible event here is the physical placing of a small dab of oil on both the forehead and hands of a sick person, accompanied by scripture and prayers that ask for spiritual and physical strength and, if it is God’s will, a healing of their medical situation. It is a source of strength during severe sickness; it is not “*Last Rites*” and there is never anointing after death.

Oil is an ancient symbol of strength and healing. The anointing with oil is meant to remind us, at a time of profound human and perhaps spiritual weakness, where true strength lies. It is with Our Lord and His loving will of what is best for us.

The forehead is anointed as the place where our thoughts arise, and is meant to direct them to Our Lord. Illness can be a time where our mind can panic and our thoughts become filled with fear. Anointing can comfort you with scriptures and prayers that are an assurance of God’s love. The hands are a symbol of our capability of work, which has been compromised by illness, and their anointing is meant to re-direct our sense of dignity as a capable person and what it means to be a human person before Our Lord as well. We are loved even if we are unable to work.

The Sacrament only has real meaning if it is administered in moments of this profound weakness, mortality, and suffering, and especially where you might be wavering in your reliance on the Lord. That is why it reserved for only those severe and mortal sicknesses, and

not for routine hospital events or passing illnesses. If you are not in a state of profound illness, the Sacrament makes no sense, and should not be called for.

The Sacrament is also designed, generally, to be administered only ONCE during a serious illness that has a trajectory toward death. However, it is common for those types of illnesses to have a rhythm of up days and down days. A sudden downturn is usually normal, and so is not the occasion for calling for *another* anointing. If you have already received the anointing during your illness or stay in the hospital, there is no need to receive it again.

We have a very strong desire to guard against superstition, magical thinking, and cultural misconceptions of what the Sacrament can and cannot do. The Sacrament is NEVER a replacement for all the normal medical procedures that modern medicine can provide. It is a spiritual source of strength for you.

We also do not multiply anointing as if multiple anointing would increase the chances of medical or even spiritual healing. We believe in the power of God's grace the first time it is administered. We do not want to dilute that grace, or the power of God, by thinking that multiple events would increase it.

### **When should the family or medical staff call?**

Whenever there is a case of fatal illness or injury; or even in cases where general anesthetic will be applied in an upcoming surgery, a call can be made for Anointing.

If possible, it is always best to call well ahead of time, in order to ensure the easiest scheduling of the Sacrament. (*We actually recommend that you would ask and receive anointing at Church before you even go to the hospital, if possible*)

Unlike the members of the Fire or Police Departments, priests are not waiting at the station for the alarm to sound, but are active each day with many other sacraments, e.g. masses, funerals, weddings, baptisms and events that cannot just be cancelled.

Waiting to the last minute may involve calling a priest who might be conducting a mass or other service in the Church and cannot come immediately. If at all possible, it would be helpful if you might anticipate circumstances and call ahead of time, so that there is time to schedule the anointing when the priest can be there, and even your family might be notified to be present as well. Waiting to the last minute can sometimes lead to delays and hurt feelings. Calling ahead of time can lead to scheduling a range of times that are convenient to you, the priest, and the family, and so lead to a very profound spiritual healing event.

Obviously, there will be times that are true medical and mortal emergencies for patients who are just arriving at the hospital, and in those cases, the nurse or family should absolutely call the parish office right away.

## **What Happens when you call the Parish office?**

During office hours, the Receptionist will take down the important information and contact a priest. If after hours the message will indicate a special emergency number to call. If no priest is available, another parish number will be offered. Privacy laws today require that only the sick person or an authorized family member may call. Our Receptionist is trained to ask about the seriousness of your situation and determine if it indicates immediate anointing, or if a schedule can be set for a later time. Again, the Church has a strong desire to guard against superstition which can easily happen to families under the stress of a loved one in the hospital or sick at home. We recognize that these are all judgment calls. However, we hope that these ideas can help both you and our parish staff work together to provide for your spiritual care at a time of physical and spiritual need.

## **Receiving Communion**

Any person asking to receive communion can call our receptionist or have the nurse call our receptionist, who will then place them on the list to receive communion from our regular Communion Ministers to the Sick.

## **Summary of the Sacrament of Anointing**

1. Anointing is for any serious illnesses that has a trajectory toward death. However, it is not “The Last Rites” and there is no Anointing after death.
2. Anointing is administered only once during a person’s serious sickness.
3. A nurse or doctor could ask if you have already received Anointing. If not, they can ask if you would like to receive it. Together you can determine the level of emergency and if the anointing can be scheduled with the priest.
4. A call to the parish emergency cell phone will be answered by a trained person who will inquire about your situation, especially if it is or is not an emergency, or if a later time can be arranged with one of our priests.
5. For future scheduled medical procedures, it is best to arrange for Anointing ahead of time, and especially to have it at the Church, and when family members and friends can also attend, rather than wait until a moment of crisis or the last minute.
6. You can also request to receive communion by calling our office and ask to be placed on the list for our regular Communion Ministers to visit. You are also welcome to request that your name be included in prayers for the sick listed in our bulletin.

**You can also see more about the Catholic understanding of the Sacrament of the Anointing in the Catechism of the Catholic Church; sections 1499 to 1532.**

## Does God ever heal the sick anymore?

The Gospel stories of healings are the happiest of all. Jesus heals the sick, removes evil spirits, and lifts the heavy rule of the Pharisees. What unites all events is *freedom*. Sickness, evil spirits, and heavy rules limit our freedom, so Jesus frees us from all of them, whether sickness, Satan, or Pharisees, as He promised in His "Inaugural Address" (Luke 4:18). "I have come to proclaim freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, and set the oppressed free." Freedom is the essence of love. What Jesus brings is freedom ...*so that we can love more!*

God always offers healing to sick persons, *so they can love more*. That is the purpose of everything Jesus ever said and did. *It is love that ensures our happiness now and in eternal life*. We believe God can heal us of our sickness, and has done so many times before, as the Gospels and stories about the Saints confirm. But those cases still seem small in number compared to the millions who have ever been sick and are still sick today, perhaps like you right now. Why is that?

We need to remember what God considers a cure. While it might seem that only a few received healing in the Gospels and only a few famous cases in history after that, we affirm that *God offers to every single sick person whatever cure it takes to restore us and our soul for eternal life*. It is our eternal life that is His goal. After all, it is eternal life for which He wants our life to prepare and which our life has always been oriented. A few more years of health here is not any kind of victory if we are still not ready for eternal life!

In all Gospel accounts of miracles, every cure always had another important purpose than just the recovery of physical health. For example, when Jesus cures Peter's mother-in-law, she gets right up and serves others. (*Matthew 8:15*) Her cure was a *means* to make a more loving life possible. *It is that love that is our purpose, not just health or sickness*. Jesus freed her to do just that. *There is no point in being healthy or sick if we do not love*. However, many people that Jesus cured left with no change in their moral behavior at all. He does not want that!

Does God cure? Yes He does always! If a physical cure will produce that eternally oriented spiritual and moral change in our understanding and behavior, and perhaps also be a witness to others, then God will produce a miraculous and amazing physical cure. If God believes that it is actually our physical illness that can produce that change in our eternally oriented understanding and behavior, and also be an amazing witness of compassion and courage to others; and for most people open to His grace that will be most likely what will happen, then it will be His will that we should face our sickness as it is with His faith-filled compassion and courage that He will freely offer in abundance.

He is still "Emmanuel" (*God with us*) the only One who truly knows and deeply feels our illness as we do, and will faithfully stand with us in every moment. There is no better companion. We can certainly pray for a cure, but while we wait, we are still followers of Christ, and still believe that our deepest happiness comes from freely loving God, others, and our self, *in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health*.

# What if I Get Sick Checklist

Here is simple list of what to do when you might get sick. Strong emotions can cloud our thinking at such a stressful time ...so simply follow this Christ-centered list!

## ***What can I let medicine do?***

- Let science do its part. Follow all your doctor's instructions as an obedient patient.
- We do not have to endure extraordinary means to artificially prolong our life.
- Nutrition and hydration are not medicine, but are ordinary means of care.

## ***What can I do as a sick person?***

- Medical Knowledge empowers you. Learn about your illness. Seek second opinions
- Spiritual knowledge empowers you. Read the Scriptures and go to Mass.
- Stay with what you know *for sure* about your diagnosis. Don't jump to conclusions!
- Open your eyes and face what is actually going on, practice good mental health!
- Remember that sickness is a natural consequence of our human/earthly condition.
- Be an obedient patient and follow normal directions and cooperate with your doctors.
- Practice good nutrition, exercise, rest, optimism, and sleep. Be a "doctor" to yourself!
- Develop gratitude for your amazing access to the latest in 21<sup>st</sup> Century medicine.
- Recognize that drugs and procedures are your "friends" that fight your "enemy!"

## ***What can I let others do for me?***

- Accept all help that is offered. It is your loving behavior to allow others to help you.
- Do not let other's attention go to your head! Don't become self-absorbed.
- Permit others to pray for you, especially in the General Intersessions at Mass.

## ***What can I do as a follower of Christ?***

- You are still a living Christian, so continue your Christian vocation to love others.
- Follow Christ who still loved others even while on the cross; so can we, with His help.
- Make a list of how you will help others, even during your illness.
- Don't seek to be the center of attention, but how you can use your illness for good.
- See the Bishops website at [usccb.org/bishops/directives](http://usccb.org/bishops/directives), for end of life guidance.
- Check out the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*; sections 2276 to 2296, for wisdom.
- Sickness can be a kind of quiet spiritual retreat where you can re-evaluate your life.
- If homebound or in the hospital, ask to receive communion on a regular basis.
- Ask for the Sacrament of Anointing if the end is near. Seek the strength of God.
- Be at peace and place yourself in the merciful and loving hands of God.

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