



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

November/December 1994

ILLNESS

One of the great challenges for a Christian is illness. Not only do we dislike getting sick, we usually don't handle it very well, at least from a Christian standpoint. Illness brings difficult temptations, which we may not even recognize as such until we have fallen. Our physical weakness makes us more susceptible to temptation, while the physical changes make us more concerned with self. The usual routine for prayer is bound to be altered, so we lose that spiritual support. And our physical weakness makes it harder to concentrate on the prayer of quiet, or even to read the daily office.

Yet for all its difficulty, sickness comes to almost all of us at some point. Like all of this world's ills, God is ready to use it to help us along in our growth into the full stature of Christ.

We should not be surprised when the sick are tempted and tempted sorely. Satan does not play fair: he will be the more active when we are weaker and less able to resist him. Thus he saved his most severe temptations for Jesus upon the Cross (tempting Him to come down and renounce His unity with sinful man), a time when Jesus had had no sleep the night before, was in excruciating pain from the scourging and abuse as well as from the crucifixion itself, and suffered under the spiritual burden of the world's sins. Satan seeks the advantage of our weakness, as he did with Jesus. But Jesus' suffering on the Cross shows us that God can use suffering for redemption.

The great challenge of illness is that it tends to focus us on self, and thus away from God. When we first find ourselves sick, whether at home in bed or in the hospital, we are apt to blame ourselves. We think that we are somehow responsible for being sick. "Why is God punishing me?" Perhaps we think back over past misdeeds, and try to decide which is the cause. Generally this is an irrational response. With rare exceptions (some accidents, venereal disease), sickness is not the immediate result of our sinful act. It is our pride that thinks it is: that we have such control of our lives that we ought to be able to control the accidents of nature -- germs, immune response, etc.

Nevertheless, we must deal with this feeling of guilt. The usual way is by examination of conscience and confession. The examination must be tailored to the strength which we have. In the weakness of sickness, we will not be able to concentrate as in health, and so our self-examination will be briefer and less thorough than otherwise. But we will recall the actions and omissions which burden the conscience, and lay them at the foot of the Cross, telling God that we are sorry for what we have done.

In essence, this is a renewal of our commitment to love God, to accept His love for us, and to make that love the foundation of our life. We are always unworthy of this love, though we are more apt to feel unworthy when we are sick in bed since we cannot do anything to merit the love: the usual good works are impossible.

It is hard to avoid self-pity when we are weak or in pain or facing uncertainty. This was so for Jesus. In His first temptation in the wilderness, He was tempted to feel sorry for Himself: that He was so hungry, even near death. But self-pity drives out the love of God: we cannot feel sorry for ourselves and love God faithfully at the same time. If God's providence (and thus His love) permits our suffering, then we need not feel sorry for ourselves. We are in His hands. He will give us all the compassion we need. It is more important for us to think upon Him, to love Him even when this is a challenge, than to give in to self-pity.

The inevitable question, "Why is this happening to me?" (with the emphasis on "me") may well be a mask for self-pity. We all ask the question. Yet it is largely unanswerable: sickness is the result of the fall, and the disorder which it brought into the world. God will use the sickness to sanctify us, to get us ready for heaven. If He permits it, then we can accept it without insisting that we know all the details of its origin and purpose. Otherwise, when we ask, "Why me?" we are implying that it ought not to be me, that there is some injustice in my suffering, and that God is somehow responsible for the injustice.

We are tempted to think that self-indulgence is justified by our illness: that it is only reasonable for us to be short-tempered, impatient, demanding, irritable. Those who care for us ought to conform to our desires, as well as our real needs. They should feel sorry for us -- and we feel quite justified in being angry with anyone who is not sufficiently compassionate. Yet this is all self-centeredness. It regards all of life as revolving around me: I'm sick, so this is only fair. But it is nevertheless false. The world does not revolve around me, even if I am sick. I practice a lie when I think otherwise.

It is hard not to be self-centered when sick. Not only do we have less energy to put into the effort, but the physical changes themselves make us more concerned with self. Do I feel better today than yesterday? The doctor is concerned with these things -- as, of

course, are we! But in sickness as in health, God-centeredness is His gift, not our accomplishment. We cannot be unself-centered (by our efforts) even when well. So when we are sick, we should still desire to live in Him, recognizing that there are large obstacles, but that His power is greater.

Self-pity, should we give it free rein, leads to despair. We cannot, in spite of our best intentions and effort, effect a cure by ourselves. Left to our own powers, we are bound to despair. We cannot do what is needed.

The crucial question is the character of our hope. Naturally we hope for a return to health. We hope to be delivered from the pain and suffering and all the debilities which go along with the sickness. Such hope is only natural. But this should not be our only -- or even our primary -- hope. As Christians, we hope for heaven, we hope for the perfect presence of our Lord and Beloved. This should be our hope in sickness even as it is in health. It may be the more immediate in sickness: the prospect of death or of long-term suffering has a way of focusing such issues. This hope -- the promised heavenly mansion -- cannot be threatened by suffering or death.

Thus the Cross becomes central. Jesus suffered and died, and is alive. That is the source of our hope. We should not be afraid to recall this hope when we are sick. There is nothing morbid about it; to hope for heaven is not to have given up on living. On the contrary, when our hope is first in God (and only second in a cure) than we can face the affliction with a certain confidence. Even if there is no known cure, or much pain is likely to come, or our mind or emotions are to be affected -- even in these scary prospects, we can have hope. It is the hope which comes from trusting God rather than self.

This brings up the other great temptation: control. When in the midst of a serious sickness, our life is literally out of our control. We cannot run it as we would wish and as we do in health. As with those other times when life gets out of control, we have a choice. We can try to assert as much control as we can -- trying to take over the program of treatment, controlling the doctors and therapists, and so on. Or we can admit that it is beyond us, and hand it over to God. Such trust is not easy, especially if we indulged our control (even unknowingly) during our healthy lives. But trust is necessary. God does not expect us to accomplish a certain amount for Him: He expects us to love Him wholeheartedly. We will never do very well at this unless we are willing to trust Him.

It is humiliating to be sick. It interferes with our pride, our ability to do for ourselves, our expectations of ourselves. But -- humility is a virtue! It helps us to be willing to accept the gift of a place in heaven. We can rise above the illness -- and the humiliation -- only by asking Jesus to take over. He does not expect the impossi-

ble of us (as we often do of ourselves). It is not required that we be well and do great deeds for Him, but that we let Him save us.

Practically, we need to find ways of fostering a God-centeredness, of being willing to trust God rather than self. This is largely a matter of willingness rather than accomplishment. If we are willing, God will give us what we need to fulfill our centeredness on Him.

Our prayer will need to be adapted to our physical abilities. In pain or weakness we will not be able to concentrate on our prayers as usual. But this does not mean that we should abandon prayer, but alter its form. If we cannot read, then perhaps we can lie back and use our imagination to picture Jesus on the Cross or in one of the Gospel stories we remember. This will put us into His presence, and take us out of ourselves. Or we can say the Jesus prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." When we can do nothing which requires concentration, we may still be able to pray in this way. Or we can ask God to take over our thoughts, and direct them when we cannot. He will thus pray in us if we relax and let Him. All prayer must be God-directed; perhaps it is only in such straits that we will let Him do it.

If more is possible, we can read the Psalms. They will help us to make sense of our experience before God. They also take us out of ourselves, and give a sound form to what we are feeling. Likewise we can use much from the Book of Common Prayer in the hospital: the Psalms, collects, and especially the Order for the Visitation of the Sick. If we are not up to reading, we might ask a visitor to read some of it aloud.

It is also important to see that the parish clergy are notified. Even if you do not wish them to call, they will wish to intercede for you, and to offer the prayers of the parish on your behalf. Since the sickness presents special temptations, it is important for the prayers of the Body to be offered on your behalf. When the priest does call, this is an essential part of his ministry: prayer offered with you and for you within the fellowship of the faithful.

The aim of the devotions is to put us in God's hands. Our part is to be willing to bear the sufferings and temptations virtuously. This is a matter of will. He does not expect us to **do** it but to **will** it. We must trust Him: if He allows sickness, He will care for us and get us through it. We need not trust ourselves; indeed, we may well see how weak we really are, and our inability to see it through. Hope is the hardest part. But, like faith, it is a gift, if we will receive it.