



LITURGICAL CATECHESIS

TO SERVE CHRIST HIMSELF: LITURGICAL CATECHESIS ON THE *PASTORAL CARE OF THE SICK*

Several weeks ago I was doing formation with a group of catechists for the sacramental preparation for confirmation. I explained that catechesis for confirmation always needs to take into account the symbol of oil. I went on to explain that oil and the action of anointing play a major role in our sacramental life. It was surprising when a few catechists questioned this statement. I asked if anyone could name any other occasions when oil is used. Someone remarked, “I think they use it when you are dying!” This was confirmed when another participant commented, “That’s when they give you the last rites.”

I am always surprised when I encounter people who still seem to have little pastoral awareness of the riches found in *Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum (PCS)*. If ever a rite needed catechesis, it is this one. I was pleased to see that the new *National Directory for Catechesis (NDC)* sets forth criteria for catechesis on the *PCS* for dioceses and parishes.

The *NDC* begins by calling for parishes/dioceses to present a catechesis that “examines the meaning of human suffering, sickness, aging, healing and death in the light of Christian faith.” What a wonderful way to begin. So many people are unaware that we have a theology of sickness and suffering. How many people see sickness or aging as a punishment? I often remember my own father saying, after each doctor’s visit, “It’s hell to grow old!” How many times have you heard someone who is suffering say, “Why is God allowing this happening to me?” or “Why does God allow so much suffering in this world?”

The General Introduction to the *PCS* begins with the meaning of human sickness and the mystery of salvation. It acknowledges “suffering and illness have always been among the greatest problems that trouble the human spirit” (1). It goes on to negate sickness as a punishment for

personal sin and proceeds to develop an awe-inspiring catechesis on the meaning of sickness and suffering in light of the Christian faith.

Sickness and suffering, healing and death are realities that involve the lives of children, youth and adults. This is why catechesis on these matters should not be limited to occasions when people and their families are confronted with them. An authentic catechesis, which enables us to deepen, enrich and grow in our faith, needs to address these issues while people are healthy. Those who have been catechized in these realities ahead of time are better prepared to see that “sickness has meaning and value for their own salvation and for the salvation of the world” (1). Catechesis on sickness and suffering needs to be an integral component in all of our catechetical programs.

The *Directory* also highlights the need for catechesis on the “basic symbols of the sacrament: the laying-on of hands, the anointing of the head and hands with blessed oil, and the words of the sacramental formula” (137). A catechesis, which unfolds the many levels of meaning of oil and touch, is a powerful way to initiate people into the mystery of sickness and lead them to a profound awareness of the salvific nature of the sacrament (CCC 1075). A catechesis on the anointing with oil also allows us to speak about sickness and suffering within the total context of our faith lives. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* acknowledges that anointing with oil has many meanings in the sacramental life and names its many uses: “The pre-baptismal anointing with the oil of catechumens signifies cleansing and strengthening; the anointing of the sick expresses healing and comfort. The post-baptismal anointing with sacred chrism in confirmation and ordination is the sign of consecration” (1294). The many sacramental anointings from birth through life enable us to make the intimate connection between our initiation into the faith and how we

manifest our faith throughout the trials and tribulations of our lives. The *PCS* points out, “The sick person will be saved by a personal faith and the faith of the church, which looks back to the death and resurrection of Christ, the source of the sacrament’s power and looks ahead to the future kingdom that is pledged in the sacraments” (7).

The *Directory* also states that dioceses and parishes should present a catechesis that teaches “like all the sacraments, the Anointing of the Sick is a liturgical and communal celebration, whether it takes place in the family home, a hospital or church, for a single sick person or a whole group of sick persons” (137). If liturgy is indeed the “*privileged place* for catechizing the People of God” (CCC 1074), then one of the best ways to catechize on the liturgical and communal nature of the sacrament is the actual celebration of it within the context of the parish community. Many parishes regularly schedule the celebration of the sacrament several times a year. Catechists for children and youth should make participation in the parish celebration a part of their catechetical programs. What better way to catechize about the meaning of sickness and suffering than to gather with those who seek the healing power and spiritual benefits of the sacrament?

One of my fondest memories is of a diocesan celebration of the anointing of the sick when we invited the confirmation candidates of the diocese to assist with the celebration. They greeted those gathering to celebrate the sacraments, assisted the sick and the elderly to their places in the assembly and joined them in prayer as they processed forward to receive the anointing with the oil of the sick. Within the context of a diocesan celebration that truly gathered the “sick among us,” they experienced the

reality proclaimed in the opening sentence of the *Decree*: “When the church cares for the sick, it serves Christ himself in the suffering members of the Mystical Body.”

Another criterion for catechesis listed in the *Directory* directs that parishes and dioceses should present a catechesis that “clarifies that the Sacrament of the Anointing of Sick ‘is not a sacrament intended only for those who are at the point of death,’ but that any baptized person who is seriously or chronically ill or in danger of death from advancing age may receive this sacrament” (137) and should explain “that those preparing for serious surgery, the elderly whose infirmity declines further, and seriously ill children should ask for sacramental anointing” (138). The liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council have gone a long way to restore this as a sacrament of the sick. The two criteria listed above call for us to bridge the gap between those who still hold on to the belief that it is only a sacrament for those on the verge of death and those who do not take advantage of its healing powers for other serious occasions, such as surgery or danger of death from advanced age. The very fact that these are listed as criteria is evidence that we must continue to offer a deliberate catechesis in our parishes that not only unfolds our understanding of sickness and suffering within the context of faith, but also strives to highlight the ministerial role the sick play in our midst. The *PCS* states “Moreover, the role of the sick in the church is to be a reminder to others of the essential or higher things. By their witness the sick show that our mortal life must be redeemed through the mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection” (4).

Finally, the *NDC* expects that catechesis “encourages the members of

the parish to visit and care for the sick and express concern and love for them” (138). One of the remarkable features of the *PCS* is that it encompasses the entire spectrum of the church’s ministry to the sick, from visits to the sick (children and older persons) to those who are dying, and it does so within the context of a variety of situations. The *PCS* explains that the church’s ministry to the sick “is the common responsibility of all Christians, who should visit the sick, remember them in prayer, and celebrate the sacraments with them” (43).

An authentic catechesis that flows from the *Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum* should ultimately strive to eliminate any situation where the poor, sick and suffering in our midst are alone. It should result in society taking inspiration from us because they see how we believe that sickness has meaning and value for the salvation of the world. It should make a difference in the lives and ministry of the faithful who are involved in the ministry of healing on all levels. Finally, it should transform all of us because we believe that “When the church cares for the sick, it serves Christ himself in the suffering members of his Mystical Body” (*PCS Decree*).

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