

Homily for 15th Sunday of the Year 7/12/15

by Fr Emile Dubé

I would like to read to you part of a letter I received about 42 years ago when I was studying to be a Salesian, from a high school classmate of mine. He wrote to me because he knew I was a seminary and would want to know what he had experienced and was writing this letter from a hospital bed, while recuperating from battlefield injuries he suffered during the Vietnam conflict.

He writes:

“From the split second I was hit, I was completely alone. I’ve heard it said, but never realized it- when you’re dying there’s no one but you. You’re all alone. I was hurt bad, real bad; a 4.2 mortar landed about six feet behind me and took off my left leg, badly ripped up my left arm, hit me in the back, head, hip, and right heel and ankle.

“Shock was instantaneous, but I fought it- knowing that if I went out I’d never wake up again. There were three or four medics hovering over me, all shook up, trying to help me; but all I could do was try to pray.

“The trouble was I couldn’t think...No one could tell me there wasn’t a God at that moment. I knew I would die and fought desperately for ground- every inch, breath of life. I knew I was in the state of serious sin.

“I tried to pray but couldn’t. I asked the guys to talk to keep me conscious, and most of all, if anyone could help me pray. I felt like there was no one but me; those around me I could only hear talking over me.

“Well, with a heck of a lot of stubbornness and luck (providence), I lived to make it to the chopper two hours after being hit. After they carried me into the first-aid station, I felt four or five people scrubbing my body in different places.

“This brought me to open my eyes, and I could see about a foot in front of me- and not too well at that. Anyways, someone bent over me. I wasn’t sure who it was, but I thought it looked like our battalion chaplain; his nose was practically on mine.

“After I saw him, I started to go out-I figured for the last time. When I talked I could only whisper, and this took all I had. As I was going out, my eyes closed and I heard Father say, are you sorry for your sins? With my last breath and all I had, I whispered, ‘Hell, yes!’

“Then a split second before I went out, I felt oil on my forehead. And something happened which I’ll never forget- something which I never experienced before in my life!

“All of a sudden, I stopped grasping for every inch of my life;
I just burst with joy...
I felt like I had just got a million cc’s of morphine.
I was on Cloud Nine.
I felt free of body and mind.

Homily on the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick

“After this, I was conscious about three or four times during the next ten day period; I never worried about dying. In fact, I was waiting for it.”

My friend’s letter is a beautiful description of his experience of receiving the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. It is one of the most powerful descriptions I have ever heard.

This marvelous sacrament, as we know, has its origin in Jesus. He healed people in his lifetime by laying hands on them and anointing them. And today’s gospel makes it clear that Jesus empowered his disciples to continue his ministry of healing.

The Gospel says of them, “They anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.” (Mk 6:13) In a similar way, the Letter of James instructs the early Christian community to present themselves for healing, saying:

Are there any who are sick among you? Let them send for the priests of the Church, and let the priests pray over them, anointing them with the oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick persons, and the Lord will raise them up; and if they have committed any sins, their sins will be forgiven them. (James 5:14-15)

That’s exactly what my friend describes so beautifully in his letter. He describes the remarkable healing of mind, body, and soul that was brought about by the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.

If we were to put into the simplest terms what this sacrament is all about, we might express it this way: It is a continuation in modern times of the healing ministry that Jesus began in gospel times.

Just as Jesus healed people in his times by the physical actions of his physical body, so Jesus continues to heal people today through the liturgical actions of his mystical body, the Church.

In other words, the Jesus who healed people in gospel times is the same Jesus who heals people today. The only difference is the manner in which Jesus heals them.

In gospel times, Jesus healed people by means of his earthly body. He touched them directly with his earthly hands. Today, Jesus heals people by means of his risen body, his mystical body, the Church.

He touches them indirectly through the hands of the priest. And when he does, they experience the same kind of healing that people in gospel times experienced. For example, some experience a full or partial physical healing like the one my friend experienced.

Others experience a mental healing that results in a peace of mind, like the peace that my friend experienced. Still others experience a spiritual healing that results in a soul-stirring experience of God’s love and forgiveness, like the forgiveness of my friend experienced.

In other words, the healing of this marvelous sacrament is not confined to the physical healing only. In fact, the most tangible healing experienced might not be physical, but mental or spiritual.

Homily on the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick

And so if we are suffering from serious illness, or if we are suffering from advanced age, or if we are preparing for surgery for some serious ailment and have not yet been anointed, then today's gospel invites us to request it.

Or if we have a family member or a friend suffering from one of these conditions, then today's gospel invites us to invite them to receive this sacrament. Unfortunately a deacon cannot administer this sacrament, this can only be done by a priest, as the sacrament of reconciliation takes place in the anointing of the sick.

And if we accept Jesus' invitation, then we too can hope for some tangible physical, mental, or spiritual healing, as people in gospel times experienced and as my friend experienced.

This is the beautiful message of today's gospel. This is the good news that Jesus speaks to each of us today. This is the great mystery we celebrate in this liturgy. What Jesus did for countless people in gospel times he also wants to do for us in our times- if we but let him.