

THE HEALING MINISTRY IN THE LIGHT OF CHRISTIAN IDEALS

(Lecture delivered in the Shanahan Hall, Onitsha, 17 August, 2013)

1. Illness a stubborn fact in human existence

One of the harsh realities of human existence on earth is illness. The fact of sickness of one kind or another stares men and women in the face and carries with it considerable suffering. When a person gets sick, the person often experiences a remarkable degree of powerlessness or limitation. And more severe illness can be a possible announcement that death could follow.

Illness can lead to anguish and a temptation to fold in into oneself. Sometimes it can even bring the person near the brink of despair, if not revolt against God. The sick person can begin to ask why it is precisely he or she who should get so sick. But it need not be so in every case. Sickness can also make a person more mature and dispose the person to discern better what is essential in life and what is not. In many people, illness can lead to a search for God and the beginning of a return to him (cf *Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1500-1501*).

It is therefore no surprise that our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ gave considerable attention to sick people during his time on earth and that he gave his Apostles, and through them to his Church, rather clear instructions on the matter. I am, therefore, happy to have been asked to propose to you some reflections on *The Healing Ministry in the Light of Christian Ideals*.

We shall begin by taking a quick look at healing in the Old Testament, and then in the New Testament. We shall dwell especially on Jesus and healing. He sent his Church to heal, and this has to be considered. The texts which the Church uses in her prayers for the sick give us an insight into the mind of the Church. What therefore should be the attitude of the Christian towards healing will emerge from these considerations. We shall close with a look at the healing ministry in Nigeria.

2. Suffering and Healing in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament illness is often linked to sin and evil. Sickness is among the punishments which God threatened for people's unfaithfulness (cf Dt 28: 21-22; 27-29, 35). The sick person who prays to God for healing confesses to

have been justly punished for his sins (cf Ps 37; 40: 106:17-21). God promises to heal the people's faithlessness (cf Jer 3:22; Hos 14:4).

The Old Testament also gives us examples of God healing people because of prayer to him. God healed Abimelech, his wife and female slaves because of the prayer of Abraham (cf Gen 20:17). The Lord heard Hezekiah and healed the people (cf 2 Chr 30:20). "The man of the Old Testament lives his sickness in the presence of God. It is before God that he laments his illness, and it is of God, Master of life and death, that he implores healing (cf Ps 6:3; 38; Is 38)" (CCC, 1502).

The Old Testament also knows sickness as visiting the just person. Job is a major example. God sent or allowed this just man much suffering just to demonstrate his righteousness. Tobit is another example: he was innocent and he suffered blindness for years. The prophet Isaiah finally announces that God will usher in a time for Zion when he will pardon every offense and heal every illness (cf 33:24).

3. Jesus Christ and Healing

The Gospel shows us many encounters of Jesus with the sick and suffering. He worked miracles in their favour and healed many of them: "Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity" (Mt 9:35; cf 4:23). These healings are signs of his messianic mission. They are signs that the promised Messiah has arrived, especially among the poor: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the good news preached to them" (Lk 9:22). These miracles, says the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "manifest the victory of the kingdom of God over every kind of evil and become the symbol of the restoration to health of the whole human person, body and soul. They serve to demonstrate that Jesus has the power to forgive sins (cf Mk 2:1-12); they are signs of the salvific goods, as is the healing of the paralytic of Bethesda (cf Jn 5:2-9; 19-21) and the man born blind (cf Jn 9)" *Instruction on Prayer for Healing*, 2000, p.6).

The healing of the paralytic is particularly instructive. Four men lower him down through the roof to the feet of Jesus. Contrary to what they and the people around may have been expecting, Jesus begins with the forgiveness of sins: "My

son, your sins are forgiven”. At the general surprise, the scribes criticize what they regard as the theological presumption of Jesus’ words. Jesus proves his power to forgive sins by then giving the paralytic physical healing. At the same time, Jesus shows that the forgiveness of sins has priority and is the foundation of all true healing. The name Jesus means *Yahweh saves*.

Jesus is merciful, kind and considerate. Before multiplying seven loaves of bread and two fish to feed four thousand men, he said to his Apostles: “I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days, and have nothing to eat; and I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way” (Mt 15:32). Earlier the evangelist tells us: “As he went ashore, he saw a great throng and he had compassion on them, and healed their sick” (Mt 14:14).

Jesus associated himself with our sufferings. He came as healer of our bodies and souls. “He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed” (Is 53:5). He wished to be in all things like his brothers, except sin. He knew tiredness, scourging, crowning with thorns and crucifixion. And he suffered to see his Virgin Mother stand at the foot of the Cross and suffer untold agony. His invitation to us is full of compassion: “Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Mt 11:28-30).

Jesus expected, and sometimes asked for, faith on the side of those who wanted healing. He used spittle, mud, laying on of hands and washing to heal. The sick tried to touch him “for power came forth from him and healed them all” (Lk 6:19; cf Mk 1:41). When he visited his home place Nazareth, the people showed scanty faith in him and the evangelist tells us: “And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands upon a few sick people and healed them. And he marvelled because of their unbelief” (Mk 6:5-6). Jesus rewarded the faith of the Canaanite woman (cf Mt 15:28), praised the faith of the centurion (cf Mt 8:10) and blamed Peter for being a man of little faith when he began to sink in the waters (cf Mt 14:31).

4. Jesus sent his Church to heal

The Gospel tells us that the Lord Jesus bestowed the power to heal illnesses on his Apostles and on other first preachers of the Gospel. When Jesus was

sending the twelve Apostles on their first mission, he gave them “the power to drive out unclean spirits and to cure every disease and illness” (Mt 10:1; cf Lk 9:1). He commanded them: “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without pay, give without pay” (Mt 10:8). When the Lord was sending out the 72 disciples, he charged them: “Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you; heal the sick in it and say to them, ‘the kingdom of God has come near to you’” (Lk 10:8-9). It is therefore clear that Jesus gave the power to heal to his disciples in order to confirm their mission, not for their personal exaltation.

After the ascension of Christ into heaven, the early Church preachers continued to heal in the name of Jesus. “Many wonders and signs were being done by the Apostles” (Acts 2:43; cf 5:12) These amazing deeds manifested the truth and the power of their mission. “Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people” (Acts 6:8). “The multitudes with one accord gave heed to what was said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs which he did. For unclean spirits came out of many who were possessed, crying with a loud voice; and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So, there was much joy in that city” (Acts 8:6-8). Peter did many miracles in his preaching: he healed a lame beggar (Acts 3:1-10); the people “even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and pallets, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them” (Acts 5:15); Peter healed Aeneas the paralytic in Lydda (cf Acts 9:32-35), and raised Tabitha (Dorcas) from the dead (cf Acts 9:36-43). Paul performed many miracles in Iconium (cf Acts 14:3); cured a cripple at Lystra (cf Acts 14:8-11); in Ephesus “handkerchiefs or aprons were carried away from his body to the sick, and diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them” (Acts 19:12); he raised Eutychus from the dead in Troas (cf Acts 20:9-12), and in Malta he cured the father of Publius of fever and dysentery and also other sick people (cf Acts 28:8-9).

The Church carries out the ministry of healing first by the administration of the Sacraments of the Anointing of the Sick, of Penance and of the Holy Eucharist. More will be said of this in the next consideration. The Church also promotes the welfare of the sick by running hospitals and medical centres, big and small, and by striving to provide solace and care for the sick in many ways. Many Religious Congregations have been founded simply for the service of the sick. We must

thank the religious Sisters in Nigeria for their engagement in the medical and healing apostolate on behalf of the Church.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, St Paul speaks of the charism of healing, understood as “a gift granted to a person to obtain the grace of healing for others” (Congr. for the Doctrine of the Faith: *Instruction on Prayer for Healing*, p. 10). It is the Holy Spirit who distributes this and other charisms to individuals in the Church as he thinks fit (cf 1Cor 12:9, 28, 30). We should, however, note that “even the most intense prayers do not always obtain the healing of all illnesses. Thus St Paul must learn from the Lord that ‘my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness,’ and that the sufferings to be endured can mean that ‘in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his Body, that is, the Church’” (CCC, 1508).

5. Liturgical Texts on Healing

The Church has learned from Christ and the Apostles to take loving care of the sick. She shows them the solicitude and love of Christ by visiting them, praying for them, providing them with medical attention and showing them love in other ways. Here we concentrate on official prayers of the Church for the sick. In the first place come the three Sacraments mentioned earlier.

First to be reflected upon is the Sacrament “especially intended to strengthen those who are being tried by illness, the Anointing of the Sick” (CCC, 1511). “The Church has never ceased to celebrate this Sacrament for its members by the anointing and the prayer of its priests, commending those who are ill to the suffering and glorified Lord, that he may raise them up and save them” (*Rite of Anointing of the Sick and their Pastoral Care*, 5). In the blessing of the oil immediately prior to the anointing, the Church prays: “Make this oil a remedy for all who are anointed with it; heal them in body, in soul, and in spirit, and deliver them from every affliction” (*ibid.* 75). In the first two prayers after the anointing, the healing of the sick person is requested. Since the Sacrament is a pledge and promise of the future kingdom, it is also a proclamation of the resurrection, when “there shall be no more death or mourning, crying out or pain, because the old order has passed away” (Rev 21:4) (cf Congr. for the Doctrine of the Faith: *Instruction on Prayer for Healing*, pp.8-9).

At the Blessing of the Oil of the Sick during the Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday, the Church begs God to pour forth his blessing so that all “those who are

anointed with it may receive healing, in body, soul and spirit, and be delivered from all sadness, all weakness and suffering”. In the liturgy of Good Friday, Christians are invited to pray to God the Father Almighty that he “may keep diseases away... and grant health to the sick”.

In order to allow this Sacrament to bring all its effects, it is necessary that the priest be called early enough in the sickness, and not just when death is expected. The Second Vatican Council preferred that this Sacrament be called *The Anointing of the Sick* rather than *Extreme Unction* (cf *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 73), because physical and psychological healing can also be affected by this sacred rite. Of course, the major grace is the forgiveness of sins if there are any still to be expiated, together with their remains. But the Sacrament also strengthens the soul of the sick person, helps to turn bitterness into gratitude, sadness into joy and a sense of rejection into acceptance. The more consciously the sick person takes part in this Sacrament, the more this healing dimension can be realized.

We should next reflect on the Sacrament of Penance, or of Reconciliation, and healing. Apart from offending God, sin also does other harm. It causes wounds. “Just as the wound of sin is varied and multiple in the life of individuals and of the community, so too the healing which Penance provides is varied” (*Rite of Penance*: Introd. 7). Sin causes wounds to self-esteem, to self-image and to relationships or memory. The Sacrament of Penance helps to heal the wound to self-esteem by restoring God’s peace to the penitent. The wound to self-image is healed by the realization that one is loved by God and so is lovable. And the wound to relationships and memory is healed by loving or forgiving someone and by integrating past events into the present. By the Sacrament of Penance we learn to discover the truth about ourselves, not only the simple truth that we are sinners, but also the liberating truth that we are loved, redeemed and forgiven. Self-rejection is also the rejection of God’s acceptance. This Sacrament, when we are open to its grace, brings healing to this wound of self-rejection. It has been observed that fewer Catholics who go to Confession manifest neurotic symptoms than others. Moreover, in countries where less and less Catholics receive the Sacrament of Penance, more and more of them now have to consult counselling services.

The healing power of the Holy Eucharist should not be underestimated. Granted, the major reason for offering the Eucharistic Sacrifice is to adore God, to thank him and to ask pardon for our sins. But Saint Irenaeus reminds us that “life

in man is the glory of God” (*Adversus Haereses, Lib 4, 20, 5-7*). The Mass, offered for the glory of God, also heals within us everything that is opposed to that glory: resentment, bitterness, selfishness and lack of forgiveness and reconciliation (cf Mt 5:23-24). In the penitential rite at the beginning of Mass we cry out to Christ in such phrases as: “You were sent to heal the contrite of heart”, “You heal, Lord Jesus, the wounds of sin and division”. We also acknowledge our sinfulness before God and pray for pardon and healing. After the *Our Father* the priest prays: “Deliver us, Lord, we pray, from every evil, graciously grant peace in our days, that, by the help of your mercy, we may be always free from sin and safe from all distress, as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ”. A psychiatrist once commented that about 90% of his patients were mentally sick because of anxiety, and that anxiety is a spiritual condition which he can do little to alleviate. The answer to anxiety is trust in God. “Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you” (1 Pet 5:7), Saint Peter advises us. Prayer, with trust in God, really works. Holy Scripture assures us that God is our rock, our protection, our stronghold, our deliverer. But he awaits our cooperation. “Do you want to be healed?” (Jn 5:7), Jesus asks the sick man before healing him.

Here are four prayers in the Mass where the Church prays for healing. Before receiving Holy Communion, the priest prays silently: “May the receiving of your Body and Blood, Lord Jesus Christ, not bring me to judgement and condemnation, but through your loving mercy be for me protection in mind and body and a healing remedy”. And with all the people he then prays: “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed”. The Prayer after Communion for the Monday of the First Week of Lent reads thus: “We pray, O Lord, that in receiving your Sacrament, we may experience help in mind and body, so that, kept safe in both, we may glory in the fullness of heavenly healing”. The Church returns to the concept of healing in the Prayer after Communion for the Thursday of that same First Week of Lent: “We pray, O Lord our God, that as you have given these most sacred mysteries to be the safeguard of our salvation, so you may make them a healing remedy for us, both now and in time to come”. Indeed, Saint Ignatius of Antioch calls the Holy Eucharist “the medicine of immortality” (*Ad Eph 20, 2: SCh 10, 76*).

From all these considerations, it follows that although the Mass is not offered primarily for healing, it also promotes healing.

In the third typical edition of the Roman Missal, Mass number 45 for Various Occasions is for the sick. The Entrance Antiphon cries out with Psalm 7: “Have mercy on me, Lord, for I languish; Lord, heal me; my bones are trembling, and my soul is greatly shaken”. The Collect is followed by an alternative, and the two cover the two Christian attitudes expected of the sick: offering with Christ and praying for the removal of the illness. The first Collect prays for our brothers and sisters who are sick, that God may grant them to know that they are chosen among those proclaimed blessed and are united to Christ in his suffering for the salvation of the world. The alternative Collect implores God’s merciful help for the sick, so that, with their health restored, they may give God thanks in the midst of his Church. The Prayer over the Offerings and the Prayer after Communion both ask for healing, while the Communion Antiphon reminds us of St Paul’s conformity with the suffering Christ: “In my flesh I am completing what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the Church” (Col 1:24).

The Church has for centuries a Rite of Exorcism, to drive away the devil from possessed people (cf *De Exorcismis et Supplicationibus Quibusdam, editio tipica 1999, emendata 2004*). It is to be recommended that each Diocesan Bishop appoint a suitable priest as the special exorcist in the diocese.

The *Roman Ritual* in its *Book of Blessings* has a beautiful chapter on the blessing of the sick. After Scripture readings and bidding prayers, three alternative prayers for the sick are proposed. The first prayer begs God for the sick that they may be sustained in patience and hope to overcome their infirmities and enjoy good health. The second prayer is that the sick may receive strength, stability of mind, tolerance of pains and be restored healed to the community. The third prayer is that the sick may be uplifted by God’s right hand, healed of their pains and made joyful in the obtaining of the solace that they seek. There is also a rite for the blessing of sick children. The Church prays to the eternal Father, whose Son Jesus welcomed and blessed children, to look kindly on the young suffering children and kindly restore them healed, happy and grateful to the Church and to their parents.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith adds the following admonition which may not be superfluous, in the case of those who say that they believe in prayers but not in doctors and the hospital. This would be to ignore the will of God. The Congregation says: “Obviously, recourse to prayer does not exclude, but rather encourages the use of effective natural means for preserving

and restoring health, and also leads the Church's sons and daughters to care for the sick and to assist them in body and spirit, by seeking to overcome disease. Indeed, 'part of the plan laid out in God's providence is that we should fight strenuously against all sickness and carefully seek the blessings of good health' (*Roman Ritual, Rite of the Anointing of the Sick and their Pastoral Care*, 3)" (Congr. for the Doctrine of the Faith: *Instruction on Prayer for Healing*, p. 9).

6. Christian Attitude towards Sickness and Healing

It is important that a Christian should have the proper Christian attitude towards sickness and healing.

God does not enjoy what we suffer when we are sick. The sick person's desire for healing is good and is deeply human, especially when it leads to trusting prayer to God. The Book of Sirach exhorts: "My son, when you are ill, delay not, but pray to God, who will heal you" (Sir 38:9). Some of the Psalms pray for healing (cf Ps 6; 37; 40; 87). It is, of course, presumed that the prayer for healing adds the condition: "Nevertheless not my will but yours, be done" (Lk 22:42).

The Christian should notice that Jesus did not come to remove all suffering but to redeem it and fill it with meaning. He not only healed some sufferers, but he himself undertook suffering: fear, isolation, betrayal, denial, false accusation, scourging, hatred of the crowd, ingratitude, scorn, crowning with thorns, silence of his Father, agony, death and even denigration after his resurrection (read 2 Cor 5:21). Jesus did not promise to protect us from all suffering, but to sustain us in it. He redeemed us through the Cross. The Blessed Virgin Mary was martyred in spirit. Stephen was stoned to death. The Holy Innocents were slain by Herod. Saints Lawrence, Agnes, Cecilia, Perpetua and Felicitas, Maria Goretti and all the martyrs along the centuries gave their lives for Christ. Blessed Cyprian Michael Tansi, John Paul II and Mother Teresa of Calcutta were not spared from sickness. It is therefore wrong to imagine that God will necessarily work a miracle for every good Christian who gets sick so that he or she will recover as soon as a prayer is said for healing, or immediately after a fast is observed.

We do not always know the reason why a person suffers or gets sick. Job in the Old Testament suffered and was very sick. He did not know why. His friends thought that they knew why. But they were wrong. Job was innocent. God had his own reasons for allowing the devil to strike Job so severely. In the Gospel the Apostles asked the Lord Jesus: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he

was born blind?” Jesus answered. “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him” (Jn 9:2-3). You can see that we can often be wrong when we think that we know why a person is suffering or is sick.

Jesus saved us by his suffering, death and resurrection. By his freely undertaking to suffer and die for us, he gave the cross redemptive value. And he wants to associate us with him in his work of salvation. As Blessed John Paul II teaches: “In the cross of Christ not only is the redemption accomplished through suffering, but also human suffering itself has been redeemed... In bringing about the redemption through suffering, Christ has also raised human suffering to the level of the redemption. Thus, each man in his suffering can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ” (Apostolic Letter: *Salvifici Doloris*, 19). It follows that whoever has something to suffer, has something to offer.

This explains why the Church has such high appreciation for the sick. She not only “welcomes them as recipients of her loving care, but also recognizes that they ‘are called to live their human and Christian vocation and to participate in the growth of the kingdom of God in a new and even more valuable manner. The words of the Apostle Paul ought to become their approach to life or, better yet, cast an illumination to permit them to see the meaning of grace in their very situation: In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church (Col 1:24)’” (Congr. for the Doctrine of the Faith: *Instruction on Prayer for Healing*, p. 7, quoting John Paul II: *Christifideles Laici*, 53).

It follows that when a Christian gets sick, he or she should indeed see the doctor and can approach a priest, or other person, to pray for healing. But there should always be the readiness to accept God’s will, including the continuation of the sickness. It is not correct for a Christian to hold that Christ will never allow his follower to suffer or to get sick. Jesus himself is clear: “He who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (Mt 10:38). Sickness can become for us a means of union with Christ and of spiritual purification. Like other forms of human suffering, sickness is an important moment for prayer to ask for grace to accept the sickness in a spirit of faith and conformity with God’s will, or to pray for healing, if God so wills. For relatives, medical personnel and other people near the sick person, sickness is an occasion for the exercise of charity.

7. The Healing Ministry in Nigeria

To conclude these reflections on healing in the Christian ideal, let us cast a look at the situation in Nigeria. Here you are better qualified than I am because you are nearer the situation. I only come home on holidays once or twice a year. I shall, therefore, do no more than provoke you with a few remarks so that you will then work out how to meet the challenge in Nigeria, under the direction of your Bishops and priests.

Let us begin by thanking God for many happy and positive developments among our Catholics in Nigeria. People believe in the power of prayer. They invoke the Name of Jesus and believe that there is salvation and healing in the Name. They call on God for his mercy and for healing. They also fast, because they know that some devils are not cast out except by prayer and fasting (cf Mt 17:21). They believe that God can give to some people, priests or otherwise, the charism of healing of which St Paul speaks (cf 1 Cor 12:9), so that through their prayers, God can grant healing, more than through the prayers of others, as God knows best. All this is correct and is to be encouraged.

The practice of Eucharistic adoration is growing in Nigeria. Many parishes now have adoration chapels separate from the parish church. People go before our Eucharistic Lord to kneel, to sit, to stand and even to prostrate without much attention to human respect. They pour out their hearts in silent prayer. All this is excellent. Such people will more and more absorb “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:8) and being willing to follow him, even on the way of the Cross.

Special prayer meetings which the Bishop of the diocese has approved are great opportunities for Catholics to make contact with Holy Scripture and to be initiated into Christian prayer. Passages of Scripture are read, people say how these passages echo in them and in their experience, and the priest guides them and corrects any eventual misunderstandings. The priest also takes the opportunity to expose the Christian attitude towards suffering and sickness, also with Bible quotations and theological explanations, more than can be done in the ordinary Sunday Mass. We do not forget that Saint Jerome tells us that ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ (cf St Jerome: *Commentary on Isaiah, Prol.*: PL 24, 17).

Many Catholics are rather poor in personal prayer. They are more accustomed to prayer formulae already fixed. Of course, fixed prayer formulae are

the form used in the sacred liturgy and in community prayers. But we also need to formulate our personal prayer from the heart, with, or without, words. The prayer meeting offers the priest a golden opportunity to initiate the people into personal prayers of adoration, praise, thanksgiving, asking pardon for sins, and making other petitions in Jesus Christ. People can learn from the *Our Father* how to place God's will first, and not their personal needs. They can be helped to make their prayer Trinitarian, by directing them to the Eternal Father, through Jesus Christ his Son, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. They can learn to use the Psalms to offer prayers of praise of God in his creation, to ask for help in dangers, in sickness, in persecution and in tribulations, and to show trust in God who is good, just, merciful and magnanimous (Congr. for the Doctrine of the Faith: *Orationis Formas*, 1989, art. 4-7). If the priest does not lead the people to love of Holy Scripture and does not initiate them into how to pray personally, is he surprised if some of his people go to the Pentecostal communities (which they call Prayer Churches) for Scripture and prayer?

There is a growing tendency among some people to attribute every illness or suffering to evil spirits or, worse still, to human beings. It even happens that when a person dies, some relatives hold that he or she was "killed" by a brother, or sister, or other related person, or by another person held to be an "enemy". Some extended families have been bitterly divided by such baseless or downright superstitious beliefs. A prayer or healing session can be a suitable occasion for the priest to help such Christians to accept that while it is true that a person can be poisoned by another, most sicknesses and deaths can be explained by a good medical doctor or even a nurse. The priest explains to the people that it is not correct to hold that every sickness or death is caused by someone else. And such false accusation is against justice and charity which we owe to our neighbour.

It is possible that some temptations will arise in the conducting of healing sessions. The leader, priest or otherwise, can be tempted to think that it is he who heals, rather than the Lord. The people can think so too, and it is worse when he says nothing to correct them. What shall we say if such a leader assumes the attitude of: "After me, no more hope"? Do people regard some priest leaders of the healing ministry as specially "anointed", or as more powerful than other priests, so that the people will use blessed water only if it is blessed by those particular priests? Is there the danger that the priest who conducts healing sessions may so concentrate on them that he tends to neglect some other areas of his priestly

ministry, such as hearing confessions and visiting the sick to bring them Holy Communion? Are there financial considerations that influence decisions regarding healing? Do some conductors of healing sessions not exaggerate so much that they actually cross the line into superstition? There are many reports of abuses which are best examined by the Diocesan Bishop and his priests, because it is, they who give spiritual leadership to the lay faithful. A small Diocesan Commission, made up of really competent theologians, pastors and medical experts, can be of help to the Diocesan Bishop in the necessary service of discernment.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria has given directives for the conducting of the healing ministry. So have some individual Bishops. All those involved in this ministry will do well to follow these guidelines. It is to be remembered that a genuine charismatic or healer is obedient to Church authority. The Second Vatican Council states that extraordinary gifts are not to be rashly sought after, nor are the fruits of apostolic labour to be presumptuously expected from them. "In any case", says the Council, "judgment as to their genuineness and proper use belongs to those who preside over the Church, and to whose special competence it belongs, not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to that which is good (cf 1 Th 5:12, 19-21)" (*Lumen Gentium*, 12).

Distinguished brothers and sisters in Christ, in front of the challenge of suffering and sickness, our Catholic faith does not leave us helpless. It nourishes us with word and Sacrament. It equips us with a rich body of doctrine. Above all, it presents us with the life and example of our Lord Jesus Christ, his teaching, his power in the Sacraments and the examples of the Saints. Jesus in his public ministry healed many sick people, although not all. He entrusted to his Church the care of the sick. Let us pray the most Blessed Virgin Mary, Health of the Sick, to obtain for us the grace to live our faith in Christ our healer with joy, with trust and with perseverance.

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