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Anointing of the Sick Mass
Feast of the Annunciation of the Lord
Cure of Ars Church
March 25, 2006

My dear friends: I want you to get as comfortable as possible. Try not to be too self conscious of your illness. Remember, in some way or another, we are all victims of sinfulness and disability even though some may be sicker than others or, to put it another way, some may be healthier than others, a condition which can change in an instant! The poet says, "we are born in other's pain, and perish in our own." (*Daisy*, Francis Thompson, st. 15, 1893)

A few weeks ago I participated in the episcopal ordination and installation of the Most Reverend David Choby, the new bishop of the Diocese of Nashville in Tennessee . It took place in the Cathedral of the Incarnation, a beautiful Italianate building with a magnificent ceiling. As appropriate for a church dedicated to the mystery of a loving God consenting with another to enter and redeem the humanity he had created, just above the pillars and beneath the clerestory of the building six short sentences in large Latin letters circle the edifice – they are the highlighted points of the gospel narrative (Luke 1::26-38) you have just listened to:

ANGELUS DOMINI NUNTIAVIT MARIE
An angel of the Lord declared unto Mary

ET CONCEPTIT DE SPIRITU SANCTO
And she conceived of the Holy Spirit

Mary's reply, as the world waits in anticipation:
ECCE ANCILLA DOMINI
Behold the handmaid of the Lord

FIAT MIHI SECUNDUM VERBUM TUUM
Be it done to me according to thy word

What happened?
ET VERBUM CARO FACTUM EST
And the Word was made Flesh

And this is where we come in –
ET HABITAVIT IN NOBIS
And dwelt among us

This, as you may know, is the prayer popularly known as THE ANGELUS. In days long ago before a secular culture decreed that bell-ringing was noise pollution, bells of Catholic churches and shrines and monasteries across the world called upon the faithful at least three times a day to pause and prayerfully reflect on the God, our God, who honored our nature by

becoming one of us.

Today is the feast of the Annunciation and coincidentally highly appropriate for a Mass encapsulating the anointing of those among us who are God's children called to identify their sufferings with his.

The mystery is many sided. He did not come as a superman impervious to the limitations of the world he choose to enter. The believers of the early Church had a difficult time comprehending this but when they did they were exuberant in their acclamations of faith.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews could not contain his joy. We have a great High Priest, he proclaimed, who is like us in everything except sin. (See Hebrews, 4:14-16)

Paul was also impressed and he shared his wonderment with the Philippines as he urged them to imitate the Lord, who, though he was God, "emptied himself" of all the trappings of divinity and accepted suffering willingly, even "death on a cross." (See Philippines 2:5-8)

Christ accepted and knew personal suffering of every kind – physical, mental, emotional – if in doubt just enter Gethsemane with him. And Mary was there too, her pain made more severe by the years of anticipation of its inevitability, "thine own soul a sword shall pierce" and "she kept all these things pondering them in her heart." (See Luke, chapter 2)

My dear friends,

Never doubt that Christ does not understand your pain, never doubt his love for you, never doubt that he does not value the suffering you, like Mary, are assimilating into his pain.

This does not mean we understand all the implications of human suffering. Why some and seemingly not others? There is an element of mystery in every human life. But I am sure, because of Christ's healing vocation, that it is perfectly normal and to be expected that we should pray for wholeness, for relief from pain, for a chance to be a beneficiary of the so-called miracles of modern medicine. Why? Because, as page by page of the Gospel narratives testify, Christ was a healer, a compassionate divine physician, at whose word and touch chronic conditions disappeared, sight was restored to the blind, leprosy was obliterated, and even in some cases, the dead were restored to life.

One writer (Fr. Donald Senior, C.P.) put it this way – Christ's time was "consumed with encounters with people who were sick, blind, lame, deaf, leprous, paralyzed or mentally ill." And we can, in the language of today, add, who can fathom the exclusion, isolation, anxiety, fear, worry and uselessness, all associated with illness? I know it is difficult to be the victims of indifference, to experience the loss of one's dignity and, in our lonelier moments, to deal with interior torment.

Last month, on the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, the World Day of the Sick, Pope Benedict, commenting that "illness is a typical feature of the human condition," reiterated the great prayer of St. Augustine ;

"Have mercy on me, Lord!
See I do not hide my wounds from you.
You are the doctor: I am the sick person,

You are merciful, I am wretched.” (Confessions X:39)

During life there are very few people who have not had to deal with serious illness, either personally or in caring for others. Reflect on the realism of the marriage consent –“in sickness and in health.”

There is a wonderful interchange between an unnamed leper and Jesus on the roads of Palestine .

We walk in that leper’s shoes when we are sick and our prayer should be the same.

Against all conventions and legal banishments he joined the group around Christ which made many uneasy.

“If you will, you can make me clean’, he begged

The response was instantaneous –
“I do will it, be clean” (See Mark 1:40 -42)

Jesus reached out his hand and touched him and his leprosy was cured. You can well imagine that this caused many to gasp in shock.

This is what is happening today. The sacrament of the sick is Christ reaching out to each one of you individually, touching you, being merciful, being compassionate – fulfilling the famous words articulated by his Apostle James – “is there anyone sick among you, let him bring in the priests of the Church, and let them pray over the sick person and if he be in sin such shall be forgiven –“ (See James 5:13-15)

The secret of a “cure” is not always the remission of the cancer but the acceptance of an identification of our pains with the suffering of Christ. We must try to seek a oneness with God as he sought a oneness with us through the Incarnation.

And we express that oneness every time we receive him in the Eucharist. When you think about the Eucharist – bread becoming the BODY OF CHRIST - it is another form of the INCARNATION and, though we may be in pain we are enabled through grace to reecho the words of Mary, in our own annunciation experience, FIAT MIHI SECUNDUM VERBUM TUUM - be it done to me according to thy word. Believe me, Gabriel, the Angel, is never far away when we are invited to do something for God, and that may include suffering.

This was the great lesson I learned in Lourdes , Mary’s Shrine for the afflicted in soul and body.

I thought of Bernadette, scoffed and ridiculed by the mayor and priests of Lourdes . There are modern scoffers also. I think of Franz Werfel who went to Lourdes to discredit it, was converted and wrote that magnificent book “The Song of Bernadette.” When I returned from Lourdes I had an encounter with somebody who demanded to know about the miracles I had seen there. He was only interested in the spectacular. Now, there have been miracles and there is a Medical Bureau to take care of such extraordinary events. But for me the greatest miracles are the smiles of the sick, their new-found resignation to their illness and their new appreciation of the fact that mortal life is the prelude to an eternal life. There is a deeper

awareness of Christ's promise. I have come that you may have life and have it more abundantly. Let's not limit this promise in a selfish manner. When Bernadette left Lourdes she entered a convent in Nevers where she spent the remainder of her life, a great deal of it in ill-health. A newspaper reporter tracked her down wondering what the visionary was doing every day in the convent. Her response was a simple one, "my business is to be sick."