

## Healing

Here in Paris, I work with the *Istina* Ecumenical Center which is sponsored by the Dominican friars of the Paris province. In conjunction with this work, I recently participated in the annual Dominican pilgrimage to Lourdes. If the pilgrimage is popular, it is certainly not because of the talk that I and three Orthodox students gave, a presentation entitled “Marian Prayer in the Eastern Churches”. Rather, Lourdes attracts people who come to the Mother of God in search of healing, pleading with her to intercede with God on their behalf. Always contrary, I came back from Lourdes sick instead of healed: *voilà*, my first cold of the season! (Did somebody say *Gesundheit*?)

“The sick” come to Lourdes in trainloads. I was moved to see the throngs of sick people carted around the shrine grounds by hundreds of volunteers, who either push them in their wheelchairs or pull them about in carts reminiscent of a rickshaw. Of course, “the sick” are very visible at all the devotions, including the processions. At the daily “Mass” – i.e., what we would more properly refer to as the Divine Liturgy when celebrated in our Church and according to our rite – I looked out on a sea of “the sick”, huddled in afghans to protect them from the morning chill there in the foothills of the Pyrenees.

One particular morning as I sat with the other priests, yet one more infirm Christian was added to the picture: a crippled priest, dressed in his Dominican habit, rode up on his motorized cart and took his place with the concelebrants. My mind raced to other visions: visions of a paralyzed Ukrainian Catholic priest whom I have seen at clergy meetings in the Paris exarchate, visions of the deeply mourned Fr. Tom Glynn as he underwent debilitating chemotherapy a few years back.

Imagine that: priests dare to be sick! How contrary this is to the expectations of so many people, for whom the priest is expected to be a rock of strength, available 24/7, so as to give them what they want – which, of course, is not always what they need, but that is grist for another mill... Yes, take it from me: we priests are just as susceptible to infirmity and brokenness as are those who come to us for care.

Clerical infirmity manifests itself in many ways. The most visible infirmities are physical, when our bodies give out from years of abuse. This abuse takes many forms – be they the rigors imposed by stressful and demanding work, or be they unhealthy coping mechanisms such as alcohol abuse, overeating, and a laundry list of addictions. You see, beneath the priestly façade lurk many areas of hidden brokenness – emotional, relational, etc. – which are part-and-parcel of the priest’s lot. Unfortunately, it is precisely these areas which slowly eat away at the priest’s life if they are not attended to; headlines from recent years show us just how wrong things can go! Of course, it is very easy to point fingers at wayward priests; it is not so easy to offer timely help to those who are expected to be perfect. To be fair, the protective shield of isolation which many priests set up doesn’t help them to get the help which they need. Isn’t that partly a consequence of clericalism? When we priests allow ourselves to be put on a pedestal, we also remove ourselves from the consolation and support of people whose suffering we share.

The Church is not unaware of the all-too-human weaknesses of those ordained to serve. This comes out clearly in ancient words of ordination: “The God Who heals what is infirm, and Who makes up for what is lacking, raises the servant of God.” In case you missed the implication, the ordaining prelate realizes that the one being ordained is subject to all sorts of infirmities, and that he is lacking in many areas, but the ordaining bishop ordains him

anyway, trusting in God's grace to make things work out. (N.B., I use the masculine pronoun since the discipline of the Church does not permit the ordination of women.) And we priests are forced to confront our weakness in a silent prayer which precedes the great entrance: "Once again and many times we fall before You and ask You, O good and loving Lord, that having looked upon our petition, You might cleanse our souls and bodies of every defilement of flesh and spirit, and might permit us to stand guiltless and uncondemned before Your holy altar." Of course, confronting the truth and acting upon it constructively are, unfortunately, two different things. (This is, alas, no different for clergy than it is for lay people!)

Dominicans like to "split hairs" – that is, to make distinctions in an attempt to clarify. As a Dominican, I cannot help making what I see as a necessary distinction between "curing" and "healing". Curing is what science allows doctors do: they rid the patient of illness and deformity, thereby restoring proper biological functioning. Healing, however, goes far beyond this: healing is about wholeness, putting back together that which is broken. While I suspect that some pilgrims at Lourdes were hoping for a cure, I think that healing is a greater gift – that is, allowing a shattered spirit to be transformed, transfigured. A cure makes headlines; healing brings a greater gift: the fullness of life as promised by the One who says "I have come so that you might have life, life to the fullest." May we all seek such healing – no matter what side of the icon screen we happen to be on.

Fr. Jim Karepin, op