

The sick are Christ's friends

The sick who gather themselves to the cross of Christ in faith are the bearers of a mystery. According to the words of Paul, "they complete in their bodies what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ in favor of his Church." The sick are the friends of Christ, and furthermore they are our friends, and the friends of the Church: for they radiate the therapeutic strength of Christ and of his cross. Before such a mystery, one can only fall silent, and admire and thank our sick brothers and sisters, asking them to intercede for us for those days when we too will enter into the mystery of illness. • CARDINAL GODFRIED DANNEELS

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faithmatters

PUBLISHED BY BAYARD, INC.

TWENTY-THIRD

PUBLICATIONS

PO Box 6015

New London, CT 06320

www.23rdpublications.com

CREATIVE

COMMUNICATIONS

FOR THE PARISH

1564 Fencorp Drive

Fenton, MO 63026

www.creativecommunications.com



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Living through the ordeal of illness

faithmatters



We were made to live happily, and that includes our bodies. All the same, sometimes people get sick. For humans are also fragile beings: sooner or later, they will be affected by illness, and sometimes die from it. Still, humans exist to live, not to suffer! How can we get through this ordeal? Can we share this experience with others? How does the Church care for the sick?

A life turned upside down

LEARNING THAT YOU HAVE A GRAVE ILLNESS turns your entire life upside down. The dazed shock of the first days is often followed by a denial of reality ("It's not true!"), a breakdown ("Why me?"), or a feeling of guilt ("It's my fault..."). Shaken to the core of their being, people struck with such an illness can have all their thoughts taken over by it.

Bedridden all day at times, they're no longer on the same wavelength as active people ("What good am I?"). Falling sick often forces them to stop counting on their own strength, starting new projects, or planning for the future. And sometimes they have to give up their career, family

life, commitments, and activities.

Realizing that existence has become fragile and precarious, there's a strong temptation to shut themselves off from the world, to be disheartened, to despair. But it's also possible (and desirable) to decide to fight against the illness—to maintain a life that's as normal as possible at all costs.



Multiple breakdowns

THE SICKNESS, ESPECIALLY IF IT'S LONG OR SERIOUS, causes multiple breakdowns:

- With your own body: it no longer responds perfectly, or it becomes seriously deficient in one of its functions (breathing, circulation, digestion, movement, etc.). This can lead to medications, surgical intervention, equipment, and taxing treatments.
- With your surroundings: suddenly, life changes. Often, you can no longer leave the house, work like you used to, or pursue the same leisure activities. You're living

at half-speed.

- With your relationships: your loved ones, your colleagues, and your friends. At first, they come to visit you. After a few weeks, they come less often.
- With yourself: when you become gravely ill—especially if it's the first time—you may rebel against yourself and retreat into a feeling of powerlessness and guilt, losing your inner peace.

There is another possible breakdown: that of your trusting relationship with God. "My God, why have you forsaken me? Are you really the Father who loves me as his child? If so, why do you let this happen? And why me?"

Deciding to fight

AFTER THE INITIAL SHOCK, when the illness has become more familiar

and accepted, the future remains a permanent challenge. Intense mental rearrangement takes place and often emerges into a phase of "negotiation" with the illness: Sick persons want to believe that the illness is entirely separate from their own story. Sick persons begin to "fight" when they have finally accepted that the sickness is really theirs, that they need to accept it. This pushes them to act, particularly in the medical realm—to ask for information, not take any treatment for granted, and fight tooth and nail to defend their rights as patients.

With the help of your loved ones

OF COURSE, NO ONE CAN LIVE THROUGH SOMEONE ELSE'S ILLNESS FOR THEM. Nevertheless, loved ones can be there for the

sick persons to help and reassure them. They quickly recognize the people they can talk to, and those who don't have the strength or patience to listen or understand. Families and the medical personnel who are in close daily contact with sick people know very well that humility, listening, and tact are necessary to allow sick persons to "come out" of themselves—and see that, even diminished, they still have a place and a role.

Illness is also a test of faith

FOLLOWING CHRIST'S
EXAMPLE, the Church has
never stopped making the
sick a priority, particularly

through the sacrament of anointing the sick. This is a sign of the tenderness of God, and a special moment of contact between sick persons and the Lord. By discovering that Jesus loves and cares for them in all their fragility and weakness, sick persons receive the strength of the Holy Spirit to fight against the illness, and embrace new hope.

This sacrament is intended to give to the sick, if not physical healing, then at least strength for their ordeal. It's something like what happens at Lourdes: Few sick people come back healed, but most of them rediscover hope. ●

***Suffering is there to be fought,
eliminated, or transformed.***

» Stan Rougier

Jesus and the sick

● Jesus met the sick, the deaf, the blind, and the lame. He was moved with compassion and amazed by their faith. The miracles that he performed are just so many signs of a more profound and definitive healing: eternal life. Jesus took our sufferings upon himself in his passion: "Yet it was our infirmities that he bore, our sufferings that he endured" (Isaiah 53:4).

Extreme unction, or anointing of the sick?

● Once, "extreme unction" was considered to be the immediate preparation for death. But the Church wanted to restore the original, authentic sense of this sacrament. It is intended for all those experiencing grave bodily suffering, even if they aren't at the point of dying, and it can be received multiple times.

Being there for sick people

● Many Christians get involved by listening to people who are suffering and by being available to them. The most fundamental desire of a sick person is still to love and be loved, to be considered a unique person, and to be encouraged in all the dimensions of their being.

Praying with the sick

● There are some very ancient practices for caring for the sick that are still worthwhile. For example, the prayer over the sick person with the laying on of hands, which anyone can do. This is a "sacramental" that we too-seldom practice. You can also suggest that the sick person seek signs of divine presence: the sign of the cross, listening to the word of God, prayer, recitation of the Rosary, or taking communion at home.

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