Pastoral Perspective

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

You Are Called To Heal

In recent years there has grown in the Church an increasing emphasis on prayer as a healing process which is open to all of us as part of our common Christian ministry. It may come as a shock to us to realize that we have a power which seemed at one time to be confined to sacred places like Lourdes and Fatima or to very special people whom we recognized as Saints with powers to cure.

Even Augustine at one time in his life limited the healing power to an exceptional gift destined to win converts to the faith. But before he died, he changed his mind as his experience assured him of healings that did not fall within his earlier limited vision. Unfortunately, this earlier vision of the scope of healing has prevailed in the Church until almost now.

Today, thank God, we recognize the Anointing of the Sick as a healing sacrament far removed from the preparation for death (Extreme Unction). We are gaining confidence in the Sacrament of Reconciliation as a power to heal the wounds of sin rather than as a simple offering of forgiveness.

Healing means 'to make whole.' Even the most skilled physician cannot heal. He can only provide the best conditions for the body to heal itself. Gradually we are learning that it requires psychological attitudes to encourage the healing process. In other words, if I do not have the will to be healed the best of medical techniques cannot help me.

Basic to a theology of healing is a vision of what it means for a person to be whole, ie. to be healed. The need to belong is fundamental to each person. To be a person is to be interpersonal. THIS SIMPLY MEANS THAT WE ONLY COME TO KNOW AND LOVE OURSELVES BY BEING KNOWN AND LOVED BY OTHERS. This is precisely where we become a part of the healing process.

We are made to the image and likeness of God and our God is one community — Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That means that our human person grows to personal unity and self-identity through a community. This vision is far different from our individualistic and competitive culture which sees God as demanding and all powerful and which leads to so much of our mental illness. A vision of God as a community of persons joined in self-giving love provides us with a solid grounding in healing and a challenge for renewal in all we do as Church and society.

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The root cause of our inner illness is original sin. This basic sin was a disbelief in God's love which resulted in disobedience. The result became an anxiety to direct one's own life autonomously. The first humans were called to walk familiarly with God in paradise (then and always the Promised Land) as they trusted in His guidance. They forfeited this by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (the power of autonomous decision), ie. to make oneself the measure of the direction life is to take. Once separated from their basic trust in God, they had to create their own value system and suddenly found that they were naked. Then came insecurity and a whole series of accusations — blame to each other and to the serpent.

There resulted a burden of working the earth with a minimum of results and a dominating and clinging relationship to each other. And so they became wanderers in a foreign land as they were driven from what had been a land of promise and hope.

And so it is with all of us who do not accept the unconditional love of God. We spend our lives trying to prove our lovableness by blaming others. What needs healing is our basic distrust in God's unconditioned love for us personally, ie. we have to allow God's love to remove our distrust and our fear of rejection, failure and pain.

We all have the power to heal by renewing our interpersonal relationships. And we do this by reflecting God's unconditional love in the community of our families, parishes and neighborhoods. There are broken hearts and wounded spirits all around us. We can reach out to heal and make them whole again by providing the climate in which God can heal them. For He alone has the healing.

St. Paul is really giving us the formula for the healing process when he speaks of the attributes of love. (1 Cor.-XIII)

To love is to care, ie. to become another in mind and heart. St. Paul affirms his people when he tells them that they dwell in his heart and then asks them to make room for him in their hearts.

To love is to accept a person in his uniqueness. The Good Shepherd calls each of the flock by name. He healed people by personal attention: "And laying His hands on each of them, He healed them."

To care is to rejoice when others rejoice and to be sad when they are sad.

Healing love is manifest when we show an eagerness to listen to one another.

Healing love is at work when we show reverent courtesy for the dignity of a person. Love is never rude, arrogant, irritable or resentful.

We provide the climate for healing when we offer words of encouragement — when we praise someone.

And, finally, may I suggest the simple, yet powerful words that can heal — THANK YOU. There are not enough of us saying those words today.

Yes — you and I have a common vocation to the healing ministry and we have the power of the Spirit given to the Church at Pentecost to make it effective. It is not a hidden mystery or ritual. It is a way of life that touches and heals whenever we say: "I CARE, I LOVE YOU, I THANK YOU.

Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness

Pope Paul delivered the following address during the General Audience on May 3.

We could not say, at first sight, why there come to our mind the words of St. Matthew's Gospel, chapter five; the famous Sermon on the Mount, where, "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" are called "blessed", "for they shall be satisfied." And these blessed words occur to us at this meeting with you, our beloved visitors, perhaps because your presence drives home to us more keenly the moral and social uneasiness that there is in the world of today, from which you come. And here before us your expectant and trusting spirits declare to us the hunger and thirst that afflicts them: it is the hunger and thirst characteristic of our society, resulting from the conditions, both habitual and contingent, of present life. The motives are opposing ones, but they lead to the same result -- restlessness. In some, this latter is caused by the very prosperity that they enjoy. Rather than enjoy its satisfaction, they feel the stimulus of its insufficiency; this is, for them, the hunger and thirst of having more. In others, this restlessness is caused, with greater reason, by the insufficiency of that which they possess, or by the precariousness of their position in the unstable and faltering social concert; an insufficiency which is expressed in the hunger and thirst of which the Gospel, the Word of Christ, speaks to us, and which it describes as bliss: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Mt 5:6).

What shall we say about these words of the Gospel?

In the first place that they reflect, in a different form and to a different extent, an essential, psychological reality which we can call common, that is, belonging to all, the reality derived fundamentally from man's very nature. Man, it must be recognized, is an incomplete being who, even if he gets what he wants, is never satisfied; he is a being so made that he is always tormented by hunger and thirst, by desires which would demand greater satisfaction. Man is like Joseph, Jacob's favorite son, whom he described, in the Bible, as the growing son, the rising shoot (Gen. 49:22).

The positive sense of this tendency to desire, to grow, to have, is that this should be according to righteousness; that is according to a divine plan inscribed in man's ideal nature, such as God the creator implicitly inserted in the typical, that is, good, concept of man himself. To trace this plan in the way of perfection indicates the line of development, that is, the hunger and thirst for righteousness assigned by God to man's lot: it is the implicit "righteousness" that man must desire and bring to explicit completion; it is the evangelical promise that lies at the end of this beatitude. The hunger and thirst for this perfection will be, in the plan of the Gospel, finally satisfied; and hunger and thirst for this perfection already constitute bliss.

And what is righteousness, which the Gospel puts as the object of the evangelical man's hunger and thirst? It is that which must be, and does not yet exist perfectly. It is that which moral science defines as duty, moral obligation, the law to be applied, the divine will to be carried out. It is that which is desirable by virtue of a divine intervention, by way of rational logic, or also by way of charismatic inspiration. Furthermore, this fundamental factor of moral life can have an application to man's spiritual and real life: duty can be the burden of the soul, and it can possess its energy. Christ decides and proclaims; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for this commitment of human life, namely the accomplishment of one's duty, to the extent of sacrificing oneself; because such accomplishment will change into bliss the fidelity to duty fulfilled. Here is the Gospel, with its promise and, we can say, with the attendant bliss.

The mere desire itself, which the Gospel designates by hunger and thirst, possesses the miraculous virtue of giving a foretaste of the bliss, the joy, of fidelity to righteousness. This is a great comfort for us. We can already have a foretaste of the peace of the spirit in the preparatory phase of the accomplishment of our duty, which is, precisely, the phase of desire, resolution, good will. And it often happens that this initial aspiration to righteousness changes in generous souls the general direction of unsatisfied desires which make existence unhappy. Because these desires are selfish, they are not according to "righteousness", which in the Gospel reaches and realizes love. Only the latter has the secret of bliss: today in the present life; tomorrow, in the future one which is, indeed, eschatological and mysterious, but guaranteed by Christ's infallible promise.