

SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY: Class 3

Sacraments of Healing: Anointing of the Sick

The Mystery of Suffering: Carlos is ten. He is in the hospital dying of a degenerative muscle disease. Jackie is wearing a wig to her senior prom because her hair fell out during radiation treatments. Terry has a stroke at age thirty. Bev has had blinding migraines at least once a week since she was eleven. Jason will never run again after the car accident. Elaine's joints are in constant pain. Margaret can no longer control her bladder. Michelle.... "Out of the depths [we] cry to you, O Lord. . ." (Ps 130:1).

Suffering and illness are part of the reality of our world. Sometimes we know what causes them. Sometimes we know why this person is afflicted and not that one; but most of the time we have no idea. Why does cancer strike a teenager, a toddler, a mother of six? Why would a dancer's muscles suddenly start to degenerate? Why should one seventy-year-old woman lose control of her bladder while another does not? Why would a fifteen-year-old break his neck in a freak accident? Why? Why? Why? For thousands of years people have asked this question— why suffering?— but we have not found an answer.

When the Messiah came, many expected him to provide an answer to the question about suffering. People asked Jesus whose fault illness was. They challenged him to "heal himself" and to prove himself by putting an end to all suffering (see Lk 4:23). They called him to "come down off the cross," to show that he could and would eliminate all suffering, and then, they said, "we will believe" (Mt 27:42). But Jesus did not come to explain suffering or to take it away. He came to be with people as they suffered and to teach them how to respond to suffering.

There have always been those who say that suffering is just the way of the world; we need to accept it and move on. They say, "it is God's will," as if those words should be enough to take away the pain or stop the tears. Jesus taught us that this type of stoicism is not what God wants from us. When Jesus' friend Lazarus died, Jesus cried. On the night before his crucifixion Jesus said, "my soul is sorrowful even to death" (Mt 26:38), and his anguish was so great that his sweat became like drops of blood. And Jesus himself prayed, "Abba (Father), you have the power to do all things. Take this cup away from me" (Mk 14:36).

No matter how great our faith is, suffering is real and it hurts. We want it to go away. What is more, suffering is something we can and should try to eliminate, if and only if we can eliminate it without eliminating or diminishing love.

Jesus asked God to release him from the suffering that loomed ahead, but he also said, "still, not my will but yours be done" (Lk 22:42). Jesus accepted arrest, torture, and crucifixion because to do anything else would have been to deny his relationship with God or his love for those in need.

The Church's document Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum reminds us that we are called to follow Jesus' example: "We should fight strenuously against all sickness and carefully seek the blessings of good health, so that we may fulfill our role in human society and in the-Church." At the same time we should be prepared to accept the suffering that does come our way and move through it with love and trust for God.

Lessons of Suffering: Jesus taught that suffering should not lead us into despair or revolt against God. The fact that we are suffering does not mean that God is not there or that God does not care. Whenever we suffer God suffers with us. Elie Wiesel, a Jewish writer who endured the concentration camps as a boy, tells a story that captures the Catholic understanding of God's place in our suffering.

One morning all of the prisoners were called out to watch the execution of three people, two adults and a young boy. All three were to be hung. The ropes were placed around their necks and the supports were kicked out from under their feet. As the two adults fell their necks were broken and they died instantly. But the child was too light. The rope did not break his neck. Instead he hung there struggling and kicking, trying to get air into his lungs. The other prisoners were forced to stand and watch as he slowly suffocated to death. Elie Wiesel recalls hearing someone behind him ask the question, "Where is God? Where is God now?" And when he heard the question Wiesel knew the answer, God was there in front of them, hanging from that rope.

We believe that God is present in all of our suffering. Jesus comes to us when we suffer and he suffers with us. He shares * our pain, and if we allow him to, he will make that pain bearable. God's love for us only intensifies when we are suffering.

Jesus Healed Body and Soul: When Jesus encountered the sick and suffering he healed them. His compassion for the sick was so great that he identified himself with them. He said, "I was ... ill and you cared for me" (Mt 25:36). He then taught that one of the requirements of discipleship was to care for those who are sick. When we care for "one of the least ones" we do so for Jesus (see Mt 25:36).

Jesus showed a preferential love for people who were suffering. He spent more time with them than with people whose lives were going well. He shared his love for the suffering in a unique way. Because of their suffering they were invited to participate in the kingdom in ways that those who were healthy could not. Because they understood brokenness and isolation, because they were acutely aware of their own mortality, they were able to experience the wonder of wholeness, inclusion, and new life. They understood the significance of healing as a sign of the coming kingdom in a way that the healthy could not.

There is an award-winning photograph taken at an orphanage in Mexico that makes this point clearly. The photograph shows two young children who had just been given wrapped Christmas presents. One child's eyes are alight with anticipation. The other child's face is almost expressionless. The photographer explained that the first child had received a present the year before, but the second child had never received a present and had no idea what to expect.

He had been told about presents but he could not imagine what it would be like to receive one. The same was true for those who encountered Jesus. Those people he healed and restored to life in the community had some understanding of what it meant to be granted new life. Those who had never experienced healing or renewal did not really know what to expect. Like the child who could not experience the wonder of the gift in front of him, they could not experience the wonder of Jesus' presence and healing actions.

Jesus instructed his disciples to heal the sick as he did. After his resurrection, Jesus commissioned the eleven apostles to "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature." As one of the signs of this ministry, Jesus told them that "They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover" (Mk 16:15, 18).

As a Church, we are responsible for offering healing to the sick in our midst. In order to carry out our responsibility we must take into account the many aspects of

true healing as it was offered by Jesus. As part of his healing, Jesus forgave sins and welcomed the sick back into the community. Jesus not only healed bodies, he also healed relationships and souls.

When he healed the man who was paralyzed, he began by forgiving his sins (Mk 2:1-12). When he healed the ten lepers, he sent them to the priest so that they might be officially reintegrated into society (Lk 17:14). The young girl who everyone thought was dead was treated the same way by Jesus. After she was healed, Jesus said she should be given something to eat (Mk 5:43). Illness often isolates people and turns them in on themselves. Disease does not just attack the body, it attacks the spirit. Sometimes it is the spirit that needs the most healing.

All of the people that Jesus healed eventually died. And it seems likely that at least some of them got ill again before they died. Bodily healing in this life 'is never permanent. But the spiritual healing which Jesus gave may well have been permanent. Although we do not know what happened to any of the people that Jesus healed, it seems likely that at least some of them were among the early Christian disciples, and maybe some among the first martyrs. No matter what was done to the martyrs' bodies, their spirits could not be broken. They understood that neither suffering nor death would last because God would take away both.

Jesus Gave Meaning to Suffering: Illness and suffering have often led to varying feelings towards God. On one extreme, illness and suffering can lead to revolt against God. Differently, very often illness and suffering can lead the person to search for God and return to him.

The Church teaches of a developing understanding of the meaning and purpose of suffering in the economy of salvation. In the Old Testament, man lives his sickness in the presence of God. He both laments his illness and implores God to heal him. The person's illness is also connected to sin; it becomes an avenue to conversion and forgiveness. As the psalmist prays, "From all my sins deliver me; a fool's taunt let me not suffer (Ps 39:9).

The linkage of illness, sin, and evil with God's forgiveness and healing of the individual also lead to the connection between suffering and the redemption of sin of others. The book of Isaiah says as much in the last of the four Suffering Servant prophecies - prophecies whose message of suffering and glorification is fulfilled in

the Paschal mystery of Jesus Christ: "Because of his affliction he shall see the light in fullness of days; Through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear (Is 53:11). Also, Isaiah announces a time when God will forgive every sin and heal every illness (see Is 33:24).

Jesus' suffering and the meaning he brought to it was the culmination of the Old Testament understanding. Jesus' suffering was redemptive, meaning that it brought humanity back into the fullness of relationship with God the Father. Jesus suffered because of his love for God and for God's people. Jesus' suffering was the price he paid to give his gift of love. He could have avoided suffering, but only by denying his love for God or for God's people. Because Jesus was willing to give himself for love, because he was willing to suffer for love, his suffering changed the relationship between God and all of humanity. His total generosity, his willingness to give his very self, undid the damage caused by Adam and Eve's selfishness. Jesus' suffering redeemed humanity from isolation and reconnected us with God.

Those who were ill in Jesus' day had a unique opportunity to participate in Jesus' initiation of God's kingdom. In a similar way, those who are ill today have a unique opportunity to love as Jesus loved and so to participate in his saving work. Illness, suffering, and death came into the world because of sin. They were not part of God's original plan for creation and they are not good. Nevertheless, our faith tells us that God uses everything, even those things which appear to be bad, to accomplish good. As the letter to the Romans expresses: "We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose (Rom 8:28).

In illness we experience our powerlessness and our limitations. "Every illness can make us glimpse death" (CCC, 1500). When we are ill we have an opportunity to surrender ourselves completely to God. When we are healthy it may be difficult to know whether or not we are trusting God. When a person is ill, trust in God becomes much easier to define. Illness can also provide a person with an opportunity to prioritize and choose those things which are truly important.

People who are seriously ill may not be able to do the things the world thinks are important, but they can still do what God thinks is important.- Suffering can free people to embrace love with the wholeheartedness of Jesus, because suffering can

reveal the insignificance of everything else. This is why Jesus says, "blessed are the poor in spirit," and "blessed are those who mourn" (Mt 5:3, 4). Those who are not filled with the things of the world can be filled with the blessings of God which are so much greater.

We Share in the Work of Redemption: As God invites us to share in the work of creation, he also invites us to share in the work of redemption. God the Father does not just give things to us, he gives us the ability to give to others. Suffering is an opportunity to love as Jesus loved. When we love through our suffering, we are united with Christ and our suffering becomes part of Christ's suffering. It becomes a gift of love which will help to change the world. Suffering gives us an extraordinary power to make a difference.

From the moment of our Baptism our goal is to be like Christ. When we are ill or suffering, we become like Christ in a very special and profound way. That is a beautiful gift which should not be despised. In the letter to the Colossians St. Paul says that in his own physical suffering he is "filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ" (Col 1:24). We know that Jesus' gift of love, Jesus' acceptance of suffering, was sufficient to bridge the gulf between God and humanity. God the Father does not ask for any more than what Jesus has already given. So what does Paul mean when he speaks of "filling up what is lacking"? It is true that Jesus' love is all that is needed to reconcile people to God, but in order for any person to benefit from that love he or she must first become aware of it. Jesus' love can only be made visible through the actions of his body, the Church. It is made visible in a particularly profound way through the actions of those members of his body who love through suffering even as he did. What Paul is saying is that through his own suffering he is able to make Jesus' love and Jesus' sacrifice present to others. In our suffering we have an opportunity to do the same.

When the disciples asked Jesus why a certain man had been born blind, Jesus • told them that he was blind so that the glory of God might be made manifest in him. Jesus said, "Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him" (Jn 9:3). But before the works of God could be made visible in him, the man had to live in blindness for many years. Our suffering may last for a very long time, but we believe that in that suffering there is a hidden promise, a hidden meaning which will be made clear to us on the last day.

The Sacrament of Anointing: Father Louis Evely wrote that "Since Christ... the meaning of suffering is no longer a distressing problem, but merely a resemblance, a staggering election." The call to suffering is a call as significant as the election to be an apostle. Nevertheless, it is impossible for a person to answer that call alone. Without the help of the Holy Spirit, suffering will not free a person to love. Instead it can break a person's spirit and weaken his or her faith. Suffering can make a person selfish, angry, irritable, demanding, and impatient. Suffering can cause an unbearable loneliness that leads to despair. Jesus has given the Church the sacrament of Anointing in order to aid those who are seriously ill and help them use their illness in service to Christ.

In the words of the Second Vatican Council: "By the sacred anointing of the sick and the prayer of the priests the whole Church commends, those who are ill to the suffering and glorified Lord so that he may raise them up and save them.... And indeed she exhorts them to contribute to the good of the People of God by freely uniting themselves to the passion and death of Christ (Lumen Gentium, 11).

Rite of Anointing: Examining the rite of the sacrament can help us to understand more of the ways the Church discerns suffering, especially the way that it unites a person to the sufferings of Christ. The priest, as representative of the Church, is the minister of the sacrament. The introduction to the Church's instruction on the sacrament, the Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum, asks that the priest care for the sick through visits and personal acts of kindness.

The sacrament itself is for any person who is seriously ill. The sacrament may be repeated if the sick person recovers from the illness after the anointing or if the same or another illness becomes more threatening. A sick person should also be anointed before surgery whenever a serious illness is the reason for the surgery. Old people may be anointed if they are in a weak condition, even if no illness is present. Also, younger people who are sick, including children, may be anointed if there is sufficient reason to be comforted by the sacrament.

The rite of anointing can take place in three situations: within Mass, outside of Mass, or in a hospital or other institutional setting. For each of these situations, the matter for the sacrament is the same: olive oil blessed by the bishop. The oil for the sick is usually blessed for his diocese by the bishop at the Mass on Holy Thursday

evening. The sacrament is conferred by anointing the sick person on the forehead and the hands, saying: "Through this holy anointing, may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up.

The person responds "Amen." When the sacrament takes place outside of Mass, the priest greets the sick person and the others present and sprinkles them with holy water. He instructs them about the need to pray for the sick, to forgive sins, and to anoint with oil. A penitential rite follows. Also, prior to the anointing, the liturgy of the Word takes place with a scripture reading that details the many times and ways God has healed. After the anointing, the priest prays the following: "Lord Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, by the power of the Holy Spirit, ease the sufferings of our sick brother (sister) and make him (her) well again in mind and body. In your loving kindness forgive his (her) sins and grant him (her) full health so that he (she) may be restored to your service. You are Lord for ever and ever.

The priest then introduces the Lord's Prayer and those gathered join in. If the sick person will receive communion, this takes place after the Lord's Prayer. In whatever setting the sacrament is celebrated, the communal nature and responsibility of all the faithful to care for the sick is stressed. This is a more recent emphasis of the sacrament especially since the time of the Second Vatican Council. Briefly tracing the effects of the sacrament and the history of the sacrament sheds more light on this development.

Effects of the Sacrament of Anointing: The sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick unites the one who is sick or older' in age with the passion of Christ. When a person is anointed he or she is in a sense "consecrated" to participate in the saving work of Jesus and to help make Christ's redemptive suffering present to the world (see CCC, 1521). Anointing completes a person's conformity to the death and resurrection of Christ which began in baptism. In the sacrament of Anointing any sins which still separate a person from Christ are forgiven if the person has not been able to obtain forgiveness through the sacrament of Penance.

Through the sacrament of Anointing, those who are ill or old receive a special grace of the Holy Spirit. This grace strengthens them and gives them the peace and the courage to overcome the difficulties that go with serious illness and old age.

This particular gift of the Holy Spirit heals the soul and, if God so wills, also heals the body. It strengthens those who receive it against temptation and anxiety and makes it possible for them to bear suffering bravely and even fight against it (see CCC, 1520. Also, Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum, 6).

"When the Church cares for the sick, it serves Christ himself" {Decree on the Pastoral Care of the Sick). When the Church cares for the sick it also participates in the ministry of Christ. Through the sacrament of Anointing the Church intercedes for the benefit of the sick person. The sick person in turn assists the Church. By uniting himself or herself to Christ's suffering the one who is sick helps the Church itself become more Christ-like. He or she makes it possible for the Church to be the body of Christ, the body of the one who suffers with us, in the world.

Finally, the person who receives the sacrament of Anointing and viaticum (see below) shortly before death has the nourishment necessary for the passover from this life to eternity with the Triune God. The Anointing of the Sick completes our conformity to the death and resurrection of Christ, begun in Baptism. It completes the holy anointings of Baptism and Confirmation which sealed and strengthened our new life in Christ. As the Catechism describes, "This last anointing fortifies the end of our earthly life like a solid rampart for the final struggles before entering the Father's house" (1523).

Viaticum: The sacrament of Anointing is for all who are seriously ill. Viaticum is the liturgical rite for the dying. Viaticum means "food for the journey." It is a person's last reception of Eucharist.

As the sacrament of Christ's Passover, the Eucharist is the fitting sacrament with which to mark the end of this life and the passing over into the next. Whenever possible, the dying person should receive viaticum within the Mass in order that as death draws close he or she may share fully in the eucharistic sacrifice which "proclaims the Lord's own passing through death to life" (Viaticum, 177). The distinctive feature of the reception of the Eucharist as viaticum is the renewal of baptismal vows by the one who is dying.

Before a person receives viaticum, he or she should participate in the sacrament of Penance, if possible, and in the sacrament of Anointing. Just as the sacraments of

Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist mark the beginning of our Christian pilgrimage, the sacraments of Penance, Anointing, and the Eucharist as viaticum mark the end of our earthly pilgrimage and prepare us to enter eternal life (see CCC, 1525).

The Historical Development of the Sacrament of Anointing: Jesus instituted the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick in his own healing ministry. The earliest actual reference to a Christian sacrament of Anointing occurs in the letter of James: “Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint [him] with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven (5:14-15).

Both while Jesus was alive and after he had ascended into heaven his followers anointed and laid hands on those who were sick in order to heal them. When prayers were not sufficient to heal a person, however, sickness was viewed as problematic. Incurable illnesses were believed to be related to persistent sin although there was no particular understanding of how or why this was true.

Nevertheless, a seriously ill person was believed to be in some way separated from the healing love of God. Certain illnesses or physical disorders that caused undue attention (e.g., epilepsy or other disorders with symptoms of uncontrolled motion or speech) were considered so bothersome that the person was not allowed to receive the Eucharist. Like the catechumens, people with these types of illnesses were prayed over at Eucharist and dismissed following the liturgy of the Word.

From the second through the seventh century prayer for healing was considered part of the overall ministry of the Church. Whenever a person was seriously ill, other Christians would gather around and pray for him or her and then rub oil which had been blessed by the bishop on whatever parts of the body were in need of healing. It was necessary that the oil be blessed by the bishop, but any Christian could administer it.

During the Middle Ages there was increasing concern with who actually did the anointing. Over time the sacrament had come to be associated with death. According to the popular view, it became necessary to have a priest at the deathbed to insure a safe departure and to carry a person into the afterlife. The sacrament of

Anointing came to be seen as something that accompanied a final reception of the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist, which - according to the Council of Trent - could be offered only by a priest.

During the twelfth century the sacrament was given the name extreme unction ("last anointing") and was viewed as a form of insurance against hell. When Thomas Aquinas wrote of the sacrament he mentioned its power to forgive sins, but added nothing about physical healing. The monastic anointing rite of the Middle Ages actually concluded with the clothing of the anointed in a penitential hair shirt. If a person did recover after being anointed he or she was expected to live out the rest of his or her life in penitence. Among other things, this meant that single people could not marry and those who were married were expected to abstain from sexual relations. It is no wonder that the sacrament became associated more with dying than healing.

In 1439 the Council of Florence declared that sacramental anointing was only for those who were in danger of death. In the first draft of the Doctrine on the Sacrament of Extreme Unction, the Council of Trent repeated this limitation. The final draft, however, said that the sacrament was for the sick, but especially those who seemed about to die. From the time of the Council of Trent until the Second Vatican Council, the sacrament of extreme unction-was associated with "last rites" and took the following form: "The person to be anointed was sprinkled with holy water. This was followed by three short prayers as well as the confiteor and absolution. Next came a scripture reading followed by a litany of petitions. The priest then laid his hands on the head of the one who was sick and offered a prayer and a blessing. The sick person's body was anointed on each of the senses and a prayer was said to accompany each anointing. More prayers were said, and the priest blessed the person one final time. A final communion or viaticum was usually offered at the same time.

The Sacrament of Anointing Today: The Second Vatican Council refocused certain aspects of the sacrament of extreme unction so that it is now more fittingly called the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. Today, the sacrament is not for those only who are at the point of death. The Council taught that "as soon as any one of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the

appropriate time for him to receive this sacrament has certainly already arrived" (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 73).

This means that when a person is old enough that the reality of death is frequently part of his or her thoughts, when a person is diagnosed with an illness which may be terminal, when a person is suffering from a debilitating disease and his or her life is not what it once was—all of these are appropriate times for the sacrament of Anointing. If the illness and suffering continues over a period of time and the person's relationship with God or with the Church is affected, the sacrament may be repeated.

Since the Second Vatican Council the Church has once again begun to think of anointing as part of the mission of everyone in the Church. The Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum says, "If one member suffers in the Body of Christ, which is the Church, all members suffer.. For this reason, kindness shown toward the sick and works of charity and mutual help for the relief of every kind of human want are held in special honor. Every scientific effort to prolong life³ and every act of care for the sick, on the part of any person, may be considered a preparation for the Gospel and a sharing in Christ's healing ministry.

It is thus especially fitting that all baptized Christians share in this ministry of mutual charity within the Body of Christ by doing all that they can to help the sick return to health, by showing love for the sick, and by celebrating the sacraments with them (32-33).

Priests are still the only ministers of the sacrament; however, the sacrament is no longer viewed as something that is between the priest, the person who is ill, and God. The priest prays for the- sick person as the spokesperson of the whole Church. Through the sacrament, the whole Church recommitts itself to the one who is ill and the one who is ill offers his or her suffering for the sake of the Church. Too often the sick and elderly feel as if they have been cut off from the rest of the world. The sacrament of Anointing strengthens the connection between the one who is ill and the rest of the body of Christ. It also gives those who feel that they have nothing left the grace to continue giving of themselves.

Today we recognize that the grace given in the sacrament of Anointing is always a healing grace. Sometimes the healing is physical. Sometimes the healing ' is a

forgiveness of sins which a person has succumbed to because of his or her illness. And sometimes the healing is a spiritual healing which turns seemingly meaningless suffering into a deeper relationship with Christ.

Sacrament of Anointing: Practical Application - I was twenty-eight years old, newly married, and pregnant with my first child. My legs started to swell. That can happen in pregnancy, but the swelling wouldn't go away. I couldn't wear stockings or socks because the pressure was excruciatingly painful. I couldn't stand for more than a minute or two and I couldn't climb stairs at all. If I did the blood vessels in my legs would burst. My husband had to carry me up and down the stairs to our apartment every day. I traveled back and forth to the rheumatoid clinic in the city several times a week.

Toward the end of my pregnancy things started to get a bit better, and when Becca was born I thought everything would be fine. But then I got a phone call from the clinic. Would I please come in to the cancer clinic? They didn't want me to worry, but they thought that I might have a blood disease and the cancer clinic was equipped to do the necessary tests. I had a new baby. I was feeling better. Yes, I was tired a lot, but what new mother isn't? I wasn't really worried. What difference did it make to me which clinic did the blood tests?

We were in the process of moving into a new house. My husband was spending a lot of time doing renovations. My dad was helping him. One Friday afternoon while they were at the house I went back to the apartment with the baby to take a nap. While I was there I received a phone call. "You have a type of cancer called lymphoma. You need to wean the baby by Monday so that you can begin chemo." That was it. There I was, all alone and someone gives me this news on the phone. Couldn't they at least have made sure that someone was around?

I was on medication for six months. I was off for two weeks and then I felt the lumps in my neck coming back. It's hard when that happens the first time. It is so much harder the second time. This second time I became aware of so many other people who were sick. I thought that I should reach out to them but I was afraid. I was afraid of getting too close to someone and having them die.

Up until then my Bible was one of those books that was always around but that I rarely read. I started reading it all the time. Whenever I couldn't sleep, I would get

up and read the Bible. I especially loved the passage, "don't worry about tomorrow, today has problems enough of its own." I would read it and then I would feel God's peace and I would be able to sleep. My doctor kept asking me if I needed anything to help me sleep, but I never did.

It was also during my second round of treatment when I first met with Brenda. She was a hospital chaplain and now she works as a pastoral associate in our church. I saw her every week. We cried together, we prayed together. She encouraged me to share everything with her. I knew it wouldn't go any farther so I told her things I couldn't tell anyone else. I told how hard this was on my marriage. Gerry is someone who just closes in on himself when he's really upset. I wanted to talk about what was happening, but he just couldn't. And then I felt hurt.

When I wasn't angry with him I was angry with myself. I felt like this was something I was doing to Gerry and to Becca. I thought maybe God was punishing me for things I had done. I thought maybe he was punishing me because I got pregnant a month before my wedding.

Brenda helped me see that God is a loving God. He doesn't punish people with horrible illnesses. Illness just happens. She encouraged me to go to the sacrament of Reconciliation and ask for forgiveness if I felt that I needed it- I did. I was starting to feel more at peace with myself and with my family. Brenda kept praying with me and for me. Every week she would put her hands on head or my shoulders or the lymph nodes on my neck where the cancer kept appearing, and she would pray that God would heal me. That touch was so important. I never realized before how much being touched meant.

The second time I was on medication for a year. I was off for a month and the cancer came back. Brenda asked me if I would like to receive the sacrament of Anointing again. A priest had administered it to me the first time I was in the hospital, but I barely realized what was happening to me.

This time I was more afraid. I was afraid to ask people to take time to come and pray with me and pray for me. I didn't feel worthy. In the end I did ask a few people to come: Gerry, my parents, Brenda, and Father Paul. We sang together. Then Father Paul sprinkled me and everyone else with holy water. He explained the sacrament of Anointing to my parents and to Gerry. He told them about what it

says in the letter to James about the Church praying with and for the sick. He reassured my parents that we weren't doing this because we thought I was going to die, but because we wanted to ask God to heal me.

We all prayed together for forgiveness. It was the same prayer that we say every Sunday at Mass, but somehow it was different this time. We were saying "I'm sorry" to each other. In that prayer my parents and Gerry and I said all the things that we had been unable to say for the past year-and-a-half.

Mom, Dad, and Gerry also each read a passage from the Bible. And then they all prayed for me. Father Paul invited them to stand around me as they prayed, and put a hand on me if they wanted to. They all did. They prayed that I would have strength. They prayed that I would- be protected from sin and temptation. They prayed that I would be healed. As they prayed I felt a peace » and comfort unlike anything else I have ever felt. I could feel God's presence.

Then Father Paul put his hands on my head and said a prayer. He anointed my forehead and my hands with oil and said a prayer. Then because of my illness he anointed my neck. I was about to start very intensive radiation. The doctors said I would probably lose my saliva glands. Father Paul said that he would anoint my neck as a special prayer that I would not lose those glands. After the anointing we all prayed the Lord's Prayer together and sang one final song. I was closer to my parents and to Gerry than I have ever been.

I began radiation the next day. I didn't lose my saliva glands. I didn't even wake up thirsty in the middle of the night. The doctors were very surprised, to say the least. Three months after the treatments were done I was scheduled to go in for., tests. Up until then I had been at peace. But the thought of the tests terrified me. It brought everything crashing back down on me.

Father Paul offered to anoint me again. This time we did it during Mass and the whole congregation prayed for me. I could feel all the weight of my illness and my fear being lifted off. I can't really describe it. But it was real. During the week between when they took the blood and when I got the results I wasn't afraid. God gave me the strength I needed.

I've been cancer free for three years now. I believe the cancer is really gone, but with my kind of cancer you never really know. The doctors will only say I'm in remission. Things may change tomorrow or in two years. But even if the cancer does come back, I'm not as afraid. God has healed my soul. I'm not afraid of dying any more.