Reflection for World Day of the Sick, February 11, 2011

Being Sick

There are obviously many ways of being sick. There are the sicknesses that everyone experiences, like having a cold, getting the 'flu, having a headache, a toothache, and so on. Then there are “sicknesses unto death”, like terminal cancer. There are also long-term conditions, like multiple scleroses. There are conditions which affect the mind or emotions, like schizophrenia.

In every sickness, a loving God is present, oftentimes an incomprehensible God, calling the person into a deeper relationship with Himself through the sickness itself. That sounds, somehow, like the pious gibbering of someone who is not sick at the moment, or not very sick. It would have more weight if the person making the statement were in constant pain, physical or emotional. Even then, it would not be a “persuasive” statement, since everyone is in a particular relationship with God, a unique relationship, which is known more or less explicitly or lived at a level below conscious awareness.

It is quite impossible to speak to all the different religious stances of people, of those within different religions, of persons who give credence to no “organized religion”, of explicit atheists. For this reason alone, the following remarks are directed at persons who are more-or-less practising Catholics, meaning that they have at least minimal adherence to the great truths of the Catholic religion, and relate to God through this belief.

Many such Catholics are going to face up to serious illness at one time or another, or are going to face the progressive limitations of old age, physical and/or mental. If a person's relationship with God has been lived in a kind of “going through the motions” blur, such a one will be ill prepared to face the rigours imposed by sickness and limitation. The statement above about God's calling each of us at every moment deeper into His love will fall, at least initially, on ears somewhat deaf to understanding, to humility, surrender and love.

Of course, since sickness falls within the great mystery of evil, no-one is going to understand it fully. But the one who is in love with God, who has a personal relationship with God, can trust Him beyond understanding. We are not speaking here about stoicism in the face of suffering, much as that may be admirable. We are speaking about life lived under the influence of actual grace, that help given by God to turn seeming tragedy into victorious love. We are a sacramental people, hence the importance of the Sacrament of the Sick as early as possible in the illness. The effects of the sacrament are multiple, but above all is the gift to live one's sickness in total trust.

The “success” of each one's pilgrimage of life is utterly dependent on one's relationship with God, with the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. As indicated above, this relationship may explicit or implicit. Without this relationship, a life truly is tragic. There is no suggestion here of some kind of individualism when we speak about our relationship with God. Our relationships with family, friends and strangers all play an
integral part in our life's journey. But all human relationships receive their power to enliven only through one's primary relationship with God.

We should, as people of faith, be entering more deeply into our relationship with God every day. Sickness will never be easy to deal with, but it can be absorbed into a person's life who is in love with God. For a person whose relationship with God is rather superficial, sickness cannot be so absorbed. What will be necessary for such a person is conversion from the attractions in life which barred the way to relationship with God to the beginnings of acknowledgment of God and trust in His love.

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