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Annunciation Parish, Shumway, Illinois
12 July 2009

The Fifteenth Sunday of the Year (B)

Throughout salvation history we see the many ways in which the Lord God calls his servants to something new and something different, building upon what they already have and do.

Today, Amos answers the priest Amaziah, "I was no prophet, nor have I belonged to a company of prophets; I was a shepherd and a dresser of sycamores" (Amos 7:14). In Amos, the Lord combined the role of the shepherd with that of the prophet. He took Amos "from following the flock, and said to [him], 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel'" (Amos 7:15).

It is the task of the shepherd to protect the sheep and to lead them to safe pasture. It is the role of the prophet to speak on behalf of God and to call the people to repentance, to lead them back to God. In this combination of roles, we see a foreshadowing of the coming of Christ. In Christ, the only Son of God "has visited his people" and spoken to us to lead us to the Father (Luke 7:16). What is more, Christ Jesus called himself the "Good Shepherd" (John 10:11).

When the Lord Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James and John he added to their role as fishermen the roles of shepherd and prophet. He said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). They henceforth cast their nets

into the sea of men to draw them into the Church and lead them Christ, calling them at the same time to repent.

It was for this very reason that the Lord "Jesus summoned the Twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over unclean spirits" (Mark 6:7). When he gave them authority of these spirits, he gave them his own authority that they might continue his ministry in every time and place, down to our own day. When they were sent out in his name, they "preached repentance. The Twelve drove out many demons, and they anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them" (Mark 6:13).

Pope Benedict XVI has given us this current Year for Priests both for priests to deepen their faith and commitment for the Lord and for the whole Church to reflect on the role and nature of priests. Today I want to focus on the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick that is mentioned at the end of today's Gospel. What is its purpose?

Sickness and suffering have long troubled the hearts of men. "In illness, man experiences his powerlessness, his limitations, and his finitude. Every illness can make us glimpse death."¹ But this is not all illness can do.

Illness can lead to anguish, self-absorption, sometimes even despair and revolt against God. It can also make a person more mature, helping him discern in his life what is

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1500.

not essential so that he can turn toward that which is. Very often illness provokes a search for god and a return to him.²

The Lord Jesus came among us as the Divine Physician for just this purpose, to heal us both in body and spirit (cf. Mark 2:17).

Long ago, the Lord God declared, "For I am the Lord, your healer" (Exodus 15:26). The prophet Isaiah foretold the coming of a Suffering Servant whose sufferings would bring redemption to his people (cf. Isaiah 53:11). "By his stripes," he said, "we are healed" (Isaiah). Isaiah also foretold a time when God would heal every illness and forgive every sin (cf. Isaiah 33:24). In Jesus Christ, this time has come, "the kingdom of God is at hand" (!)

He sent the Apostles to continue his ministry of healing and they entrusted this same ministry, this same authority and power, to certain others so that the healing ministry of Jesus might continue in every time and place until the Lord comes.

But we know that Jesus did not heal all of the sick, but only some who were sick. Likewise, the Apostles also did not heal all of the sick, but only some. Why?

Jesus' "healings were signs of the coming of the Kingdom of God. They announced a more radical healing: the victory over

² CCC, 1501.

sin and death through his Passover."³ His healings fulfilled the prophecy given through Isaiah: "no inhabitant will say, 'I am sick;' the people who dwell there will be forgiven their iniquity" (Isaiah 33:24).

At the same time, by taking the sufferings of humanity upon himself on the Cross, Christ Jesus has given a new meaning to suffering. No longer is suffering simply an overwhelming burden; now it is a means to be configured more closely to Jesus Christ and to unite ourselves to his redemptive Passion. Suffering has become redemptive.

The Lord Jesus has entrusted this Sacrament to the Church to strengthen "the faithful who are afflicted with illness, providing them with the strongest means of support" by uniting them with his own Passion.⁴ At the same time, "a return to physical health may follow the reception of this sacrament if it will be beneficial to the sick person's salvation."⁵ For those who are in need of it, this sacrament also "provides the sick person with the forgiveness of sins and the completion of Christian penance."⁶

To do this day, whenever she anoints the sick and lays hands upon them, the Church follows the example of the Apostles who did what the Lord himself told them to do. The Apostles

³ CCC, 1505.

⁴ *Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum*, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*

"anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them" (Mark 6:13.). What is more, the Apostle James commanded:

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 (James 5:14-15).

Laying on of hands...

Anointing with oil...

Who should receive this sacrament?