

RETREAT GUIDE

ONLINE, DO-IT-YOURSELF
CATHOLIC RETREATS

WHEN I AM WEAK, THEN I AM STRONG

A RETREAT GUIDE ON THE SACRAMENT OF THE ANOINTING OF THE SICK

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INTRODUCTION

Retreat Overview

Sickness and death were not part of God's original plan for the human family; they were consequences of original sin. But now, in this fallen world, no one escapes them. For a little while we may be able to ignore or avoid them—but in the end, the agony and pain of sickness and death touches every single one of us.

Whenever that time comes, when we encounter them either in ourselves or in those we love, we are faced with a critical choice:

Will we allow the illness and suffering to lead us, as the Catechism puts it, to "anguish, self-absorption… despair, and revolt against God"? (CCC 1501)

Or will we allow them to make us, once again quoting the Catechism, "more mature" and to help us "discern… what is not essential" so as to "turn toward that which is"? (CCC 1501)

Certainly we would all want to make the second choice, but many people don't; many lives are shattered by the storms of illness and death. How can we make sure that we survive and thrive through those storms, that they make us more mature and lead us closer to God? That's the question that this Retreat Guide, *When I Am Weak, Then I Am Strong: A Retreat Guide on the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick*, will explore.

- In the first meditation, we will learn from how Jesus treated the sick.
- In the second meditation, we will examine the meaning of the sacrament itself.
- And in the conference, we will dig into how our culture treats the sick and dying—and what the Church has to say about it.

Let's begin by quieting our souls and turning our attention to the loving presence of God, who is eager to spend this time with us. Let's renew our faith in that presence, and ask him for all the graces we need to fill our human weakness with his divine strength.



FIRST MEDITATION

Jesus Heals

Healing the sick was one of the central activities in the public life of Jesus. St. Matthew actually puts it on the same level as his teaching and preaching. He tells us:

> *Jesus went around to all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and curing every disease and illness.*
>
> —Matthew 9:35





And yet, even though Jesus cured many people of their sicknesses, he didn't cure everyone. This is obvious to common sense, but it is also evident from other passages in the New Testament, which show the Apostles curing the sick and raising the dead to life even after Jesus's resurrection and ascension into heaven.

Why didn't Jesus cure everyone? Or better yet, why didn't he put an end to all the pain and suffering that come from illness and death?

The Gospels themselves give us the answer to that question.

FIRST MEDITATION

Miracles as Signs

Christ's ministry of healing was not a goal in itself. Rather, his miraculous cures were, as the New Testament puts it, "signs." In the fourth chapter of St. John's Gospel, for example, this is how the sacred writer refers to Jesus's miraculous cure of a royal official's son in Capernaum:

> *Now this was the second sign Jesus did when he came to Galilee from Judea.*
>
> —John 4:54

A sign is something that points to something else, something that has meaning beyond the sign itself. For example, a sign on the highway that says "New York—100 miles" is an indication that the city of New York is 100 miles away. The sign itself is neither the city, nor the road; rather, it points to the city and the road to get there.

In a similar way, our Lord's miraculous cures weren't the destination, but pointers—signs—to the way people were meant to go. The miracles also served to show us more about him and why he came. His goal wasn't to eradicate sickness any more than feeding the five thousand was an attempt to eradicate hunger.

So, what was his goal? Back in John chapter 4, Jesus himself tells us. Referring to his many miracles, he explains:

> *Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will not believe.*
>
> —John 4:48

Jesus wanted people to believe in him, to believe in his words, his message, his grace, and the salvation he came to offer. He wanted people to accept him as the Messiah, as God become man. He wanted people to follow him and obey his teachings, so that they could leave behind the old, sinful way of living and experience a "more abundant life," as he described it in John 10:10.

He wanted lead people "out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9), as St. Peter expressed it. This was his goal—to bring people to faith in him, and through that faith to bring them to holiness and everlasting happiness, to salvation.



This was Christ's entire mission in life. Here's how St. John summed it up, in one of the most famous lines in the entire Bible:

> *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.*
>
> —John 3:16

And one way that Jesus convinced people to believe in him was by performing miraculous cures. It validated his arrival as the Messiah. These revealed two divine characteristics that made a powerful impact on everyone who witnessed them.

FIRST MEDITATION

A Merciful and Mighty God

In the first place, every time he cured someone who was sick, he showed God's interest in and care for people who were suffering. God, the one true God as revealed to us by Jesus Christ, is "merciful and compassionate" as the Book of Psalms puts it. (Psalm 145:8)

These characteristics come across not only in the simple fact that Jesus did indeed cure the sick and bring the dead back to life, but it also comes across in the *way* he performed those miracles. He showed God's mercy and compassion not only in *what* he did, but also in *how* he did it.



Sometimes Jesus performed his miraculous cures from a distance, but most of the time he did it up close, and he reached out and actually touched the sick person.

In Matthew Chapter 8, for example, we read about a leper who came up to Jesus and asked to be healed. Lepers were social outcasts. They suffered from an infectious disease that caused their skin and their extremities to slowly rot away.

Lepers were looked upon with horror because their condition was irreversible and dramatically gruesome. Even their own families shunned and rejected them. In the passage from Matthew's Gospel, notice how Jesus treats one of these lepers:

> *When Jesus came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. And then a leper approached, did him homage, and said, "Lord, if you wish, you can make me clean." He stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, "I will do it. Be made clean." His leprosy was cleansed immediately.*
>
> —Matthew 8:1–3

Jesus not only healed the leper, but he actually touched him. He reached out and laid his loving hand on this helpless, dying, horribly disfigured social outcast. As God, Jesus is all-powerful. He could have cured this leper without touching him. And yet, the Gospel makes a point of pausing on this detail: "He stretched out his hand, touched him…"

God cares about the sick, the ill, the dying, the helpless—that's what this amazing touch so vividly reveals to us. The miracles by Jesus remind us that God isn't just about some ethereal ideas or eternal wishful thinking, he cares about our needs now.

More than that, he not only cares about our sickness and pain, but wants to eradicate the source of that sickness and pain. We have to remember, even when our bodies are healthy, our souls are still infected with the leprosy of sin and selfishness.

That's one of the things Jesus reveals to us through his healing ministry, and it should spur us on to put our faith in him: He loves us more than we love ourselves. And he knows what we need even more than we do. He is worthy of our trust.

FIRST MEDITATION

Conclusion: The Lord of Hosts

But his miracles also show a second characteristic of God. They reveal his mercy and compassion, but they also reveal his power. Again, as the psalmist put it:

> *Awesome is God in his holy place, the God of Israel, who gives power and strength to his people... Great is our Lord, vast in power.*
>
> —Psalm 68:36, 147:5

Every time we attend Mass, we should call to mind this power of God. When we pray: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts," we are proclaiming that the Lord our God is a great God, powerful and mighty and victorious in battle. That's why we address him as "Lord of hosts." He is the Lord who commands the unconquerable armies of heaven.

If God were merciful and compassionate but not powerful, he would not be worthy of our trust. He would be like a nice guy with good intentions, but unable to follow through.

Jesus, through his miraculous cures, shows that God not only has good intentions, but he also has the power to fulfill them. God truly is worthy of our trust—our faith.

Even though Jesus didn't heal every sick person while he was on earth, the compassionate way he treated the weak and the sick is a sign of God's infinite goodness and limitless power.

Let's take some time now to reflect prayerfully on this truth, on the meaning behind the sign of Christ's miraculous cures, so as to renew our faith in and commitment to the Lord of hosts, who loves each one of us with an "everlasting love" (Jeremiah 31:3).

The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.

Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

1. When have I experienced God's mercy and compassion most personally and powerfully? Savor that experience and thank God for it.

2. When have I experienced God's strength and might most personally and powerfully? Savor that experience and thank God for it.

3. How do I tend to treat people who are sick, weak, and in need? How would Jesus like me to treat them? Talk to the Lord about that.



Biblical Quotations to Help Your Meditation

While he was saying these things to them, an official came forward, knelt down before him, and said, "My daughter has just died. But come, lay your hand on her, and she will live." Jesus rose and followed him, and so did his disciples. A woman suffering hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the tassel on his cloak. She said to herself, "If only I can touch his cloak, I shall be cured." Jesus turned around and saw her, and said, "Courage, daughter! Your faith has saved you." And from that hour the woman was cured. When Jesus arrived at the official's house and saw the flute players and the crowd who were making a commotion, he said, "Go away! The girl is not dead but sleeping." And they ridiculed him. When the crowd was put out, he came and took her by the hand, and the little girl arose. And news of this spread throughout all that land.

—Matthew 9:18-26, NABRE

And as Jesus passed on from there, two blind men followed [him], crying out, "Son of David, have pity on us!" When he entered the house, the blind men approached him and Jesus said to them, "Do you believe that I can do this?" "Yes, Lord," they said to him. Then he touched their eyes and said, "Let it be done for you according to your faith." And their eyes were opened. Jesus warned them sternly, "See that no one knows about this." But they went out and spread word of him through all that land.

—Matthew 9:27-31, NABRE

As he passed by he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him. We have to do the works of the one who sent me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva, and smeared the clay on his eyes, and said to him, "Go wash in the Pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed, and came back able to see.

—John 9:1-7, NABRE



SECOND MEDITATION

Strength from Weakness

Jesus performed his miraculous cures in order to stir up people's faith in him—they were signs of God's goodness and power, and so they were meant to inspire people's faith and trust. And yet, in most of the miracles recorded in the New Testament, the cures are described primarily as the result of faith.

When Jesus healed the woman with a hemorrhage, for instance, he tells her: "Courage, daughter! Your faith has saved you" (Matthew 9:22).

And a few verses later, just before he healed two blind men, he asked them: "Do you believe that I can do this?" as if their faith were a pre-requisite for the miracle (Matthew 9:28).

And when his travels took him back to his hometown of Nazareth, the Gospel writers tell us "… he did not work many mighty deeds there because of their lack of faith" (Matthew 13:58).





So, which is it? Was the healing ministry of Jesus a sign meant to inspire faith, or was it a result of faith already present? Let's take a closer look at those questions.

For those who had weak faith or no faith, seeing a miracle could indeed be a sign that would move them to believe. Or a "lack of faith" often meant a stubborn resistance or rebellion against Jesus and His work.

For those who already had faith, the miracle was almost a reward, or a confirmation, and it would in turn deepen the faith they possessed. These cases of faith and healing weren't *either/or* scenarios, but *both*. As is so often the case, Jesus meets us in our true condition and responds accordingly

SECOND MEDITATION

The Weak Are the Strong

And yet, there is another dimension to this aspect of Jesus's attention to the sick and the dying, a dimension that brings us into the core meaning of the sacrament of anointing. Over and over again in the Gospels, we find that those who are sick and suffering are somehow more open to receive the message of Christ and the grace of salvation; they are more open to the wisdom of faith. They are better able to recognize Jesus for who he truly is: the Son of God and Savior of the world.

The ones who reject Jesus and his message are the powerful, the learned, the influential, and the talented—the Scribes, the Pharisees, and Sadducees, for example. The strong and the self-sufficient seem to find it difficult to put their faith in Jesus.

Jesus saw that this was happening, and he even made reference to it in his preaching. At one point, for example, he explained why he was spending so much time with the unpopular people and the sinners by saying:

> *Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do… I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.*
>
> —Matthew 9:12

At another point, when his followers came back from a mission he sent them on to preach the gospel and heal the sick, he rejoiced at their success by praying to his Father:

> *I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike.*
>
> —Matthew 11:25

The lesson is clear: It is through the experience of our weakness, our limits, and our neediness that we actually grow in faith and come to experience the goodness and power of God more and more fully.



SECOND MEDITATION

Faith or Lack of Faith?

This comes across vividly in a passage from Chapter 9 of St. Mark's Gospel. Jesus had just been up on Mt. Tabor with his three closest disciples, Peter, James, and John. They prayed there, and Jesus was transfigured before them.

When they came back down from the mountain, they found the rest of the disciples arguing in the middle of a crowd of people. At that point, Jesus asks them, "What are you arguing about with them?"

Here's what happened next:

> *Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I have brought to you my son possessed by a mute spirit. Wherever it seizes him, it throws him down; he foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth, and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive it out, but they were unable to do so." He said to them in reply, "O faithless generation, how long will I be with you? How long will I endure you? Bring him to me." They brought the boy to him. And when he saw him, the spirit immediately threw the boy into convulsions. As he fell to the ground, he began to roll around and foam at the mouth. Then he questioned his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" He replied, "Since childhood. It has often thrown him into fire and into water to kill him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." Jesus said to him, "'If you can!' Everything is possible to one who has faith." Then the boy's father cried out, "I do believe, help my unbelief!"*
>
> —Mark 9:14-24

That is one of the most beautiful, and most honest, prayers in all of Scripture: "I do believe, help my unbelief!"

This is the drama of the fallen human race. Because of original sin and its consequences, our fallen human nature is always trying to be self-sufficient, to "be like gods," as the devil put it when he tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:5).

That deep inclination to pride and arrogance makes it hard for us to accept our need for God, for his grace, for his salvation. But unless we accept our need for God, we will never really be able to have an intimate relationship with him.



This is because intimacy in any relationship requires truth, and when it comes to our relationship with God, the truth is that we are entirely dependent on him. Here's how the Catechism puts it:

> *Recognizing this utter dependence with respect to the Creator is a source of wisdom and freedom, of joy and confidence… Man is dependent on his Creator and subject to the laws of creation and to the moral norms that govern the use of freedom.*
>
> —CCC 301, 396

When we experience sickness and the approach of death, in ourselves or in a loved one, we feel this dependence and fragility more acutely that at any other time. We feel our weakness and our neediness in a way that we simply cannot deny.

In a sense, these experiences almost force us to put our faith in God, just as the father of the demoniac boy was driven to believe even while he struggled with his unbelief.

It is precisely in these experiences, when we dramatically confront our human frailty, that God wants to encounter us, to reach out and touch us, and to reassure us of his goodness and his power.

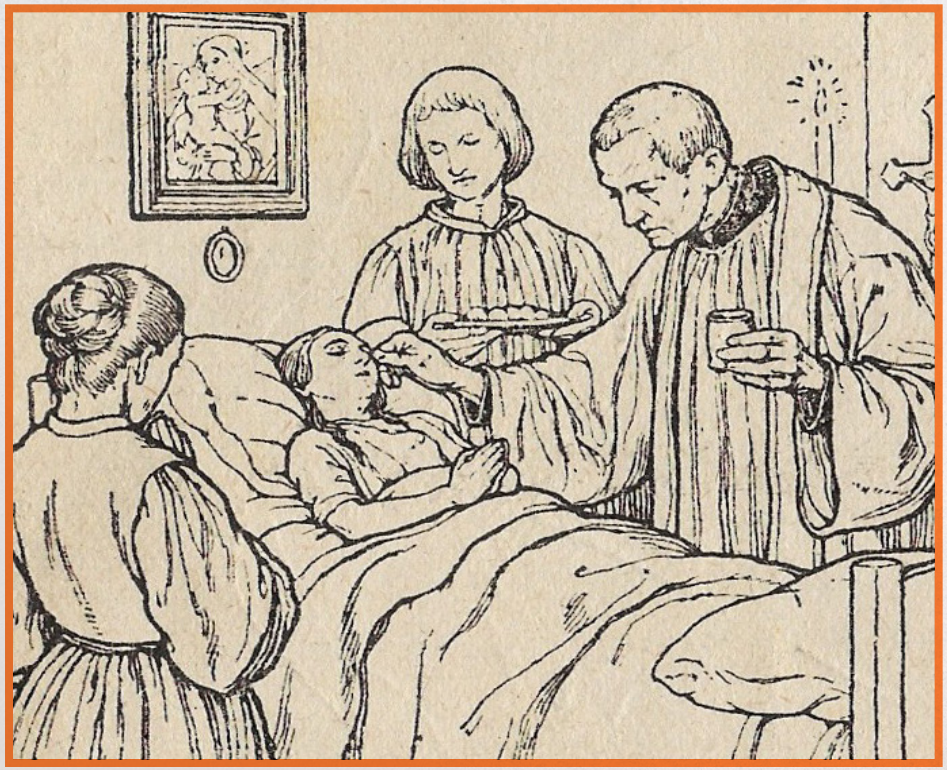
SECOND MEDITATION

The Lord Comes to Meet Us

That is why Jesus instituted the sacrament of anointing of the sick. When an ordained priest or bishop anoints a sick person's hands and forehead with blessed oil, that person can feel the presence of God upholding and comforting him.

And when the priest prays the prayer of this sacrament, the sick person is able to exercise his faith in God in a uniquely intense way, surrendering his own limitations to God's unlimited grace—that's what the words of the prayer invite us to do:

> *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.*





This sacramental encounter with Jesus gives us the grace of "strengthening, peace and courage to overcome the difficulties that go with the condition of serious illness of the frailty of old age" (CCC 1520).

We need that strength, whether we are facing the last hours of our life, or struggling to resist the temptation to discouragement and anguish after being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, or even wrestling with the anxiety that comes before a major medical intervention.

When we feel our weakness, we are more open than ever to experiencing God's saving strength—and that's why he has given us this sacrament.

SECOND MEDITATION

Conclusion: I Will Boast of My Weaknesses

Perhaps St. Paul put it best in his Second Letter to the Corinthians. He explains there that his own ongoing struggles and weaknesses had caused him so much frustration and exhaustion that he asked God to take them away. In response, the Lord told him:

> *My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness...*

Power is made perfect in weakness—this is the great message behind the sacrament of anointing. And St. Paul learned this lesson well, so that he was able to write:

> *I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me... for when I am weak, then I am strong.*
>
> —2 Corinthians 12:9–10

Let us not be afraid of our weaknesses and our need for a Savior, even when they show up in the form of painful sickness and agonizing loss. Let's live those experiences, along with every other day and hour of our lives, close to the Lord, who is all-wise, all-powerful, all-loving, and worthy of our faith.

Let's take some time now to prayerfully reflect on the meaning behind this sacrament, to stir up our belief, and to ask the Lord to help our unbelief. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.





Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

1. The Catechism explains that the grace of this sacrament "is meant to lead the sick person to healing of the soul, but also of the body if such is God's will. Furthermore, if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven" (CCC 1520). Why wouldn't God guarantee to cure the body every time the sacrament is administered?

2. In discussing when to receive the sacrament of anointing, the Catechism explains the following:

> *The anointing of the sick is not a sacrament for those only who are at the point of death. Hence, as soon as anyone of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the fitting time for him to receive this sacrament has certainly already arrived... It is fitting to receive the anointing of the sick just prior to a serious operation. The same holds for the elderly whose frailty becomes more pronounced.*
>
> —CCC 1514–1515

Why are many people afraid to suggest that a sick or elderly person receive this sacrament?

3. Reflect on my own experiences of sickness. What did I learn from them? How did I react to them? How did God work through them? Repent of any lack of faith that may have accompanied these experiences, and thank God for the graces received. Make a resolution about how I want to react the next time I have to face a difficult situation of sickness or loss.

Quotations to Help Your Meditation

Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray. Is anyone in good spirits? He should sing praise. 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.

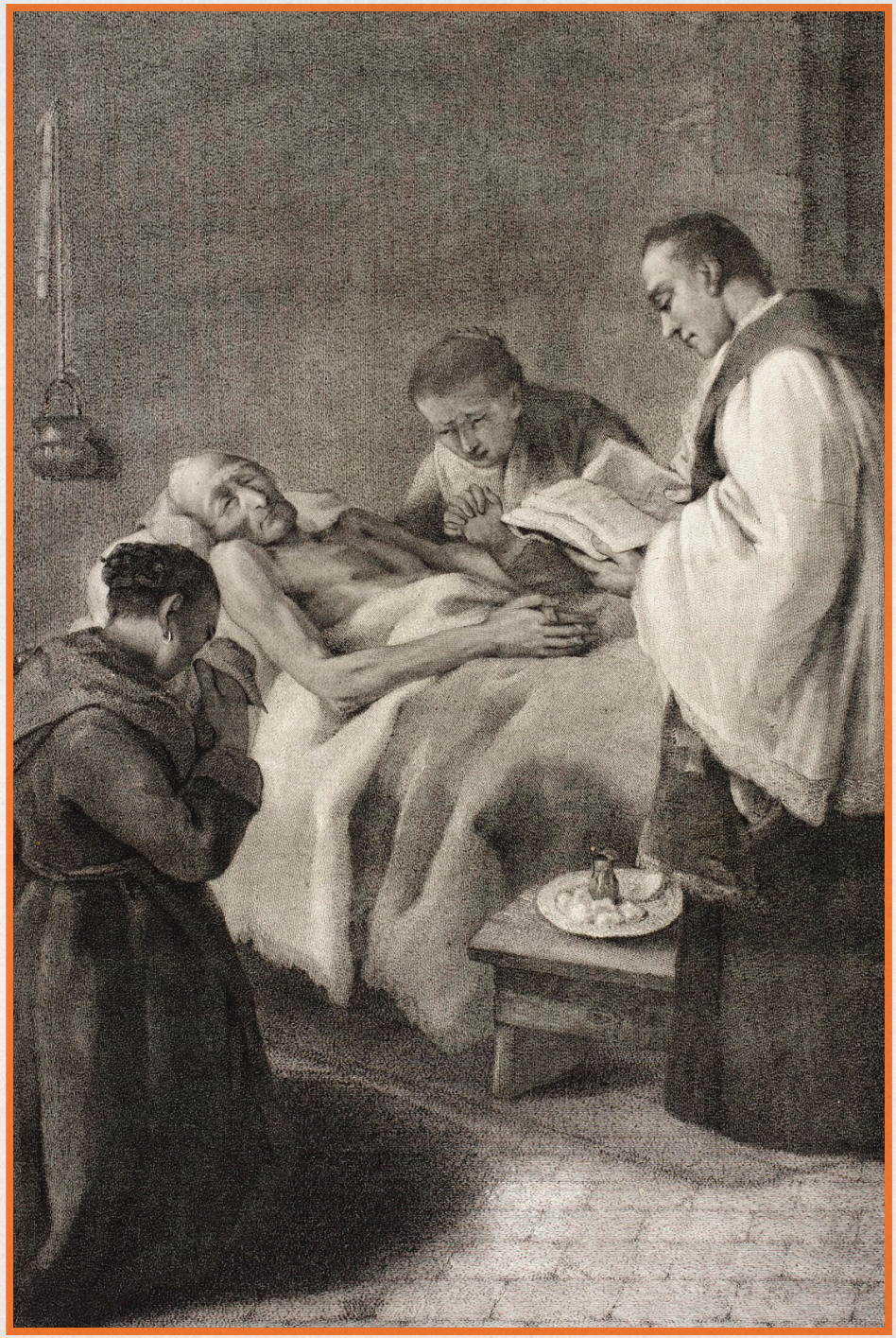
—James 5:13–15, NABRE

Although if I should wish to boast, I would not be foolish, for I would be telling the truth. But I refrain, so that no one may think more of me than what he sees in me or hears from me because of the abundance of the revelations. Therefore, that I might not become too elated, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

—2 Corinthians 12:6–10, NABRE

Christ's compassion toward the sick and his many healings of every kind of infirmity are a resplendent sign that "God has visited his people" (Luke 7:16) and that the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Jesus has the power not only to heal, but also to forgive sins; he has come to heal the whole man, soul and body; he is the physician the sick have need of. His compassion toward all who suffer goes so far that he identifies himself with them: "I was sick and you visited me" (Matthew 25:36). His preferential love for the sick has not ceased through the centuries to draw the very special attention of Christians toward all those who suffer in body and soul. It is the source of tireless efforts to comfort them.

—CCC 1503



The Sickness behind How We Respond to Sickness

We live in a post-Christian culture. As a result, behavior that is considered normal and acceptable by the laws and customs of our society often twists or rejects the good morals and the message of Christ.

For example, our culture's regard for life—of the unborn, the sick, the crippled, and the dying—has changed dramatically over the past century. We have seen a move from believing in the dignity and preservation of life to a "choice" for death. Mothers may determine when an unborn baby may live or die. Relatives may choose the same for a sick member of the family. So-called rights of individuals allow for the ultimate and irreversible expression of self-determination: suicide.





Behind it all is a legal system and government that have decided that death is better than life, all based on legal precedent, fiscal budgets and expediency. "Choice", in these cases, is presented as a reasonable and even merciful idea. But is it? Or are we dealing with a particular kind of evil?

To understand the diabolical nature behind this seemingly reasonable and merciful point of view, let's start with a brief reflection on Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Mother Teresa's Critics

Mother Teresa of Calcutta had her critics. They accused her of wasting time and making a big deal out of nothing. After all, she and her congregation of nuns specialized in taking care of the poorest of the poor, taking dying people off the street and caring for them as they died.

> *And what good does that do for society? Those people are useless. They are going to die anyway. Why waste so much time and so many resources to feed and care for them and give them a roof over their heads with a bath and a bed? Why not put our energies into taking care of people who are useful for society?*

So argued the critics while Mother Teresa was alive. And so the critics argue today.





There's an assumption underlying that point-of-view that many don't think about, but we have to call it out—expose it for what it is. Here's the assumption: that human life has no inherent value; we are simply part of an animal-like evolutionary food chain; our value is ultimately determined by our usefulness, as defined extrinsically by society—or the herd in which we live. And who decides how we define "useful"? Usually the leaders and influencers of a particular society at a particular time. Sometimes it's an individual. And the idea of "usefulness" is ever-changing.

The Law of the Jungle: Might Makes Right

So, if we bring the assumption that human life has no intrinsic value apart from its practical usefulness, then the logical conclusion can lead to these kinds of scenarios:

- People are carted to a factory or industrial complex…
- Each person is then evaluated by whoever is in charge…
- The strong—the skilled—the "useful" are given entry to the workforce, while the old, young, or infirm are redirected elsewhere…

The "useful" work until they can work no more. The ones who can't work are released—not from service, but from life. Why keep them if there is no hope of usefulness?





I'm sure you know that I'm describing life and death in Auschwitz, a Nazi concentration camp.

If human life has no inherent value, no worth beyond its usefulness as a cog in the machine of society, there ought to be nothing wrong with this scenario. And yet, we all sense that there is something wrong with it, something terribly, diabolically wrong.

What's Wrong with Auschwitz?

So, what's wrong with what happened at Auschwitz? Some philosophers will argue that what's wrong with it is simply the violation of freedom.

Those people on the train should have been given the freedom to make the choice themselves: they should have been given a chance to choose whether or not their life was worth living.

But the logical consequence of this view is the same as a group—or a culture—making the decision about the value of life. We've only traded the group for the individual and have introduced the same flawed thinking. For example:

The Nazi officer in charge of the factory has determined that his own life is more valuable than the life of the Jewish rabbi standing in front of him. And so, from the officer's perspective, there is nothing wrong with ending that rabbi's life. The rabbi may disagree; he may argue that the value of being a rabbi is equal to or even greater than being a Nazi officer.





Who is right, if there is no objective standard by which to resolve the conflict? The answer, we know from history, is that power determined the answer. Humanity was reduced to the law of the jungle. The physically stronger imposed his will on the weak. "Might makes right," as the old saying goes.

Can we go a step further? What about an individual who has determined that his own usefulness has ended? He's old or infirm, he can't function the way he used to. He's a burden or life itself feels like a burden because it isn't what it was. The *quality* of his existence isn't what he'd prefer.

Or we could go one step further than that. An individual is suffering, in great pain from an illness, and she wants to put an end to it. That should be her choice, right?

In many ways, all three examples come from the same utilitarian idea. The value of life is determined by function—a changeable standard of extrinsic usefulness that may be based on work—or the conditions surrounding us (wealth, comfort, pleasure, convenience)—or even a vague sense of personal desire or worth. She wants to "die with dignity."

Whatever the reasons, you can be sure it's not an unchanging standard based on an objective Truth. Auschwitz—whether it's built by a group or an individual—is the logical result.

Euthanasia: A Modern-Day Auschwitz

Philosophically, the Nazis determined who was useful and who wasn't—who was worthy to live, if only by their genetic make-up, and who wasn't. So it's no surprise that they were the first regime in modern history to legalize euthanasia.

Euthanasia is defined as: "An action or an omission which, of itself or by intention, causes the death of handicapped, sick, or dying persons." [A] The Nazis did exactly that, eliminating the handicapped and other unwanted people from the gene pool in their quest to dominate the world with a "master" race. It was an evolutionary concept taken to the extreme. The survival of the fittest was necessary.

Our culture has added to that policy a form of personal euthanasia—making it legal to kill oneself with the help of a doctor (called "assisted suicide") or to kill someone else when life has been deemed useless (a person in a coma, for example).

Do I sound too extreme? Modern history has shown us that the Nazis weren't the last to show how the most powerful lawmaker, or whoever has the bigger gun, will arbitrarily win the argument about the value of life and set the standard for whether it continues or ends.

In 2002, Holland legalized euthanasia. Senior citizens fled the country.

Why? Because senior citizens were being "euthanized" by doctors or younger family members who had determined that death was the better option—over suffering, or the expense of keeping the elderly alive—and decided it was time for them to "die with dignity."

Human nature, when given license, will often default to expediency and convenience. Given the choice between allowing a life that had become inconvenient or expensive to continue, the government, medical profession and family members opted for death. Many of the elderly who resisted were simply deemed incapable of deciding for themselves. Ironically, their "choice" was removed by the determination that they couldn't make a good choice (meaning the choice the others wanted). No wonder, then, that there was an exodus of senior citizens from Holland.

A: Glossary of the Catechism of the Catholic Church



The Infinite Value of a Human Life

Human life does not derive its value from some random, changing, extrinsic determination. Human life has inherent value, because every human being, simply by virtue of being human, is created and loved by God and called to live in personal communion with God.

That is why human beings have any rights at all—not because we have decided it, but because our Creator has. We have rights, but rocks, spiders, and squirrels really don't. (You could argue that, just as our rights are God-given, any "right" given to rocks, spiders or squirrels are actually given by humans.)

Every human being, regardless of age, gender, size, or health, has the same God-given rights as every other human being—*because* they are human, *because* they are created by God and are called to eternal, personal communion with God.

This has always been the teaching of the Catholic Church. Here's how the Catechism summarizes it:

> *Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God and it remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can under any circumstance claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being*
>
> —CCC 2258

This is why Mother Teresa of Calcutta didn't hesitate to pick up dying street people and bring them into a hospice in order to bathe them and feed them and give them a bed with clean sheets, even though they may have had only a day or two left to live. *That's* what it means to "die with dignity": it means to *live* with dignity, to respect the inherent dignity of every human life.

When horses and pigs get injured or sick and become useless, it is morally acceptable to euthanize them, because they are not created in the image and likeness of God. But we don't treat human beings the way we treat horses and pigs: the meaning and value of human life are not diminished by sickness, old age, or suffering.



Because human life is inextricably bound up with God—and not the other way around—personal choice about when life ends is not an option for us. It belongs strictly to God. Assisted suicide—or any kind of suicide—is an act that announces that life truly is about *me*, my pleasure or my pain is now greater than God himself, or he is not present, or he doesn't have the power to help me, or he doesn't care.

These are Lies that have nothing to do with what God himself has said. They are the same Lies that go back to the Garden of Eden, when Satan persuaded Adam and Eve that they would be gods themselves.

Discerning Ordinary and Extraordinary Medical Treatment

Does that mean we are supposed to resist death at all times, no matter what? The Church, in its God-mandated authority and wisdom, deals with this question realistically.

The one thing we can count on in life is that it will come to an end—we all die sooner or later. While we are not meant to promote death, there are circumstances where we are not morally obligated to resist death.

For example, martyrs to the faith did not resist death when given a choice to live if they renounced Christ. Or, in another example, the Church has spoken about certain medical circumstances. The Catechism says this:

> *Discontinuing medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome can be legitimate; it is the refusal of 'over-zealous' treatment. Here one does not will to cause death; one's inability to impede it is merely accepted.*
>
> —CCC 2278

At the same time, however, we are obligated always to supply basic health needs like nutrition, hydration, bed rest, hygiene, and an environment conducive to life. The Catechism continues, "Even if death is thought imminent, the ordinary care owed to a sick person cannot be legitimately interrupted."

Three criteria are generally used to determine if a particular medical procedure is ordinary or extraordinary:

If it offers a particular patient in a particular circumstance reasonable hope of benefit, without involving a serious danger of death or excessive pain, hardship, or burden, it would probably be considered an ordinary means of health care, and so we would be morally obligated to use it.

If there is no reasonable of benefit, or if it involves a serious danger of death or an excessive burden, it is probably extraordinary, so there is no obligation to use it.



These criteria have to be applied case by case. One moral theologian gives a concrete example to illustrate this point.

If a normal 16-year-old girl gets pneumonia, treating it aggressively with antibiotics, sulfur drugs and other tested procedures certainly offers a reasonable hope of benefit, does not involve a serious danger of death, and is not excessively painful or burdensome.

But if an 85-year-old man suffering from multiple forms of cancer and kidney failure gets pneumonia, treating it aggressively with antibiotics and sulfur drugs will only aggravate his other ailments, increasing his pain and very likely hastening his death. In his case, that treatment would be extraordinary, and he would not be morally obligated to take it.

Sometimes it is not so easy to determine whether a procedure is ordinary or extraordinary in some circumstances. For those cases, we need to consult with trustworthy doctors and Church pastors who can help clarify the situation.

Conclusion: When Man Plays God…

In every case, however, the principle remains the same: every human life is a mysterious and wonderful gift from God; its value depends not on some arbitrary standard of usefulness imposed from the outside, but on the mere fact of its being human.





Any society that legalizes euthanasia or assisted suicide is denying that truth. It is taking upon itself the terrible responsibility of saying that some human lives are more valuable than others—it is usurping the role of God, which, in the end, leads to injustice and destruction.

As one modern Catholic philosopher has put it: "'To be or not to be,' that is indeed the question, and for the Christian, the answer is a resounding: to be!"

Take some time now to go over the personal questionnaire, which is designed to help you apply these principles in your own life.

Personal Questionnaire

1. How deeply do I value human life, and how does that come across in my daily decisions and activities?

2. Who in my life has given me an inspiring example of how to treat the poor and weak with real dignity? What has that example meant for my life? What should it mean?

3. Who in my life has treated me in a way that made me of aware my dignity as a child of God? How did they do that, and how did it make me feel?

4. Is my attitude towards myself always in accord with the truth about my human dignity? In what circumstances do I tend to believe in lies about my not being loved or lovable by God?

5. Judging strictly by popular culture (TV, movies, other main-stream media), what does our society think of the poor, disabled, elderly, and otherwise disadvantaged?

6. Express in my own words why every human person is worthy of respect, regardless of their extrinsic utility to the rest of society.

7. What might be the root reason why some people would want to "purify" the human race of its weaker members? How does that root reason show itself in my own mind and heart?

8. How would I explain to someone the difference, as the Catechism points it out, between euthanasia and a decision not to engage in extraordinary and disproportionate medical treatments?

9. Who are the people in my life who are weak, poor, or in special need? How do I normally think of them and treat them? How could I treat them more in accordance with their human dignity?



FURTHER READING

For Reflection & Prayer

If you feel moved to continue reflecting and praying about this theme, you may find the following books helpful:

- *Salvifici Doloris*
  by John Paul II
- *Three Philosophies of Life*
  by Peter Kreeft
- *Making Sense Out of Suffering*
  by Peter Kreeft
- *The Problem of Pain*
  by C.S. Lewis
- *Trustful Surrender to Divine Providence*
  by Claude de la Columbiere

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