

## Redemptive Suffering Re-examined

By Henri Lemay

Many priests and trained spiritual directors tend to prescribe redemptive suffering without much discernment. In healing prayer ministry, we also encounter many people who blindly offer up their illnesses for spiritual benefits but at the same time ask God to heal them. They cannot have it both ways. Redemptive suffering is an obstacle to the effectiveness of healing prayer. Although well established in the Catholic tradition, the vocation of a victim soul must be prudently discerned. Healing testimonies are a greater public witness of God's love and power than enduring disease. The Bible tells us that there is no darkness in God 1 Jn 1:5 and that death (and by extension, illness, a major cause of death) came into the world through sin Rom 5:12. In the list of achievements accomplished by faith, the only Biblical mention of illnesses is not that people could endure them well but that they "recovered from infirmities." Heb 11:34 CPDV2009 Out of the 3,779 Gospel verses, 727 (almost 20%) relate specifically to healing, deliverance, and the resurrection of the dead. Never did Jesus say, "Live with your pain for the glory of God."

Many people misunderstand three sets of Bible passages as justifications for accepting illness as God's will.

**The Thorn in My Flesh:** In the three lists of problems during his ministry that St. Paul presented in 2 Co 6:4–11, 11:23–27, and 1 Co 4:9–13, he never mentioned disease. Although God allowed Paul to have "a thorn in the flesh" 2 Cor 12:7 He did not will it. It was from "an angel of Satan, to beat me." The devil opposed his work of evangelisation.

**I Complete What is Lacking:** In Colossians, we read Paul's words that "in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church." Col 1:24 NRSV-CE Paul was not sick when he wrote that. He was in prison. He was being persecuted. To conclude his letter, Paul wrote, "Remember my chains." Col 4:18

**I Take Up My Cross:** All Christians know that they are called to take up their cross and follow Jesus. He said it in all four Gospels. Twice, it's recorded in Luke (9:23 and 14:27) as well as in Mk 8:34 and Mat 16:24 NRSV-CE. Many Catholics believe wrongly that this metaphorical cross refers to sickness and injury.

The context of this declaration of Jesus, which concerns all His disciples, is immediately after He had told His apostles for the first time that He was going to Jerusalem. The authorities would hand Him over to the pagans, the Romans. They would mistreat Him, whip Him, and crucify Him, and three days later, He would rise from the dead. After He spoke, Simon Peter went to Jesus and tried to dissuade Him from this kind of language. Jesus discerned the voice of Satan as

an inspiration for what Simon was saying. Jesus said this to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" Mat 16:23, Mk 8:33 NRSV-CE He was talking to Satan and not to Simon Peter. To Simon Peter, He said, "You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Mat 16:23 After that, He said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Mat 16:24, Mk 8:34

**Jesus died of persecution, not of sickness.**

He did so willingly because His purpose for being born was precisely to die on a Cross and to come back to life. His mission was to break the hold of illness, death, sin, and the devil over mankind. He came to destroy the works of the devil, so He had to go to the Cross.

Thus, sickness is an enemy of Man. Just like sin and death, it comes from the devil. Jesus came to free us from sickness. To say that we are all called to offer our physical sicknesses in unison with Christ's death on the Cross is not biblical. It is traditional. The Church has accepted this as a traditional spirituality through the centuries. However, during His earthly ministry, Jesus never recommended it to His followers. He never said to a sick person, "I'm not going to heal you. Illness is your cross. You ought to carry it."

Two Catholics operate the website [www.carryyourcross.com](http://www.carryyourcross.com). They say, "To carry your cross means to fully trust in God...Living this way comes with persecution, temptation, and pain." They encourage declaring your faith publicly and they know that persecution will follow.

Fr. Michael Scanlan defined<sup>1</sup> correct redemptive suffering as the suffering imposed on us by others. It is martyrdom, torture, banishment, ridicule, the enslavement of Christians, persecution, mockery, and the loss of one's rights because of one's Christian faith. Redemptive suffering is also the hardships endured for the Gospel such as hunger, cold, and shipwrecks. These are the trials and difficulties that strengthen faith and purify the heart. These are the sufferings that Jesus and His disciples had endured. They are the highest form of worship to the Father and all Christians are called to carry these crosses.

Fr. Scanlan recommended three attitudes: always believe in the desire and the power of God to do the kindest thing possible; always look for the healing of illnesses by personal care, medical science, and the LORD's power to heal; and be alert to those special occasions where illness is present for the greater good of building the Body of Christ.

Early in the Christian era, healing was a normal part of the work of Christ. It was normative for believers to heal the sick. Even the dead were raised. There was a power in the early centuries of the Church that was lost in the course of history, especially when the Roman Empire stopped persecuting Christians and

welcomed Christianity. Miraculous healing became rare for several reasons. At the same time, persecution was no longer a daily reality, so another meaning was given to carrying the cross.

We can trace the misunderstanding that illness is invariably a person's cross to the *Pastoral Rule* of 591AD written by St. Gregory the Great. The document, which the Church gave to bishops for the thousand years that followed, contained many wise and charitable directives. Unfortunately, it also declared illness to be God's chastisement for personal sin and His restraint on sinning further. Compassion and healing prayer—hallmarks of Christ's mission on earth—were largely removed from the mindset of the Church and Christian society as a result.

**Jesus came to heal** the sick. Jesus healed every person who went to Him or was taken to Him. Jesus even ran after people to heal them. At Bethesda, the man who was waiting by the poolside didn't even know who Jesus was. Jesus asked him if he wanted to be healed and He healed him. The blind man in Jerusalem was born blind. Jesus found him and healed him by rubbing mud made with His spittle on his eyes.

Jesus loved to heal the sick; He never refused to heal the sick. The only time we read in the Gospels that He didn't heal many sick people was in Nazareth, His hometown, because people there did not believe He was the Messiah. Because they did not put their trust in Him, God respected their decision and He did not heal many of their sick.

Therefore, it is an error for someone to imprudently proclaim that he is called to offer his sickness up to be united with the Cross of Christ. Unfortunately, this has become the dominant spirituality for Catholics and some other Christians who are sick.

**Offering Up Prevents Healing:** Ironically, no one who believes in offering up an illness would tell someone not to go to their doctor to get healed. Why, then, should they not recommend going to the Great Physician for healing? Nonetheless, offering up an illness or injury for the salvation of souls or one's spiritual sanctification effectively declares it *corban* Mk 7:11—a gift or offering consecrated to God—and off-limits to healing. In other words, the person is perhaps unwittingly saying that he doesn't want the condition healed by God, nature, or medical science. The offering restrains God from healing him. The late Fr. Peter Coughlin reported praying over people with the same illness and some were healed while others were not, the difference being those who were not healed had offered up their suffering.

This is analogous to a person who makes a vow of poverty and later has a family. The vow restrains God from blessing the family with prosperity. The person inclined to make such a vow must discern it.

**The Second Vatican Council** took steps to restore the receptivity of Catholics to healing. They brought about the reintroduction of charisms in the life of the Church. Among them is the charism of healing.

An example of this is the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which, in 2000, published an instruction on healing<sup>2</sup>. They published it in part because they knew Catholics struggled with this ambivalence: “What do I do with my illness? Do I offer it up to get spiritual benefits or is it okay to ask for my healing?” The Church wanted Catholics to know that health is a good thing. It has always been the teaching of the Church that health is a great benefit and to lose it is to lose something precious. God usually wants us to be healthy, to be able to serve others and to serve Him. It is normal and licit for us to ask God for healing. That’s why the first conclusion of the teaching is that it is licit—it is good practice—for a sick Catholic to ask God to heal his illness.

At the Colloquium that was held immediately after the publication of this instruction on healing, Cardinal Bertone, who was its main presenter, told us that soon after the Second Vatican Council, when the charismatic renewal arose and the Roman Curia heard of healings all over the world, some were doubtful.

But the reports kept coming in year after year, decade after decade. They couldn’t doubt it anymore. The sources were too widespread and numerous. The LORD was renewing His Church with the gift of healing.

Cardinal Bertone and others believed that the re-emergence of the charisms of healing flowed from Saint Pope John Paul II’s call for a new evangelisation. We realised that evangelising takes more than words. Sometimes, signs and wonders open the eyes. They call attention to God’s power and love. Some in the Curia leadership felt that they should open this door for Catholics by issuing an Instruction on Prayer for Healing.

However, many spiritual directors and others continue to spontaneously suggest to sick people that they offer their illness up to the LORD. It is ingrained in us. It is almost a reflex even though it is not biblical teaching.

It is biblical to offer your persecution to God. That’s what taking up your cross and following Jesus means. Like Jesus, you will be persecuted. If you are a Christian, if you are a disciple of Jesus, if you are out there evangelising, you will be persecuted. You will be misunderstood. You will be contradicted. You will be opposed, scorned, and ridiculed. However, you must love your persecutors as Christ loved those who, in His day, opposed Him. Jesus said you must take up **this** cross. Lifting up the persecution you receive for the salvation of souls, including those of your persecutors, is good and noble.

It is also licit to offer up other forms of suffering that do not constitute self-harm.

Many of the things that are going wrong in the world have the devil as a source, either directly or indirectly. He hates humanity. He wants to destroy us and he attacks us.

**The devil attacks humans through illness**, injury, sin, oppression, possession, and death. Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil. He came to heal the sick. The Catholic Church has never said that sickness is a good thing. Although God can bring good out of it, suffering is not something that someone should seek.

**Sozo is the Mission of the Church:** This world is not fair. It has many inequalities, suffering, wars, loss of dear ones, and inevitable death. The experience of suffering goes beyond physical illness and injury.

Jesus came to redeem all human suffering. Illness is something that He came specifically to heal. That is what He taught—actually, commanded—His disciples to do. He commanded Christians to announce the Good News of salvation, Mat 10:7 heal the sick, raise the dead, cast out evil spirits, Mat 10:8 make disciples of all nations, and baptise in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit Mat 28:19. The same biblical Greek word—*sozo*—is used interchangeably for the salvation of souls, healing of bodies, and deliverance from demons.

Healing prayer is rightly called power evangelisation. In *On the Making of Man*, Saint Gregory of Nyssa wrote, “Healing is the main door through which the knowledge of God comes to human beings.”

**Offering up illness is a tradition that must be discerned.** Many saints have lived this and have gained great benefit from it for their ministry. We need only think about the great stigmatists like St. Francis of Assisi and St. Padre Pio; and other victim souls like St. Faustina Kowalska, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Sr. Carmelina Tarantino, and Luisa Piccarreta. However, this is an exceptional calling. It is a vocation. It is not for everyone and it must be discerned.

Moreover, it would be futile to pray for the healing of those called to endure a medical condition and who have offered up their suffering. For example, Francis MacNutt teaches that “If a person is called to suffer, whether for the Kingdom of God, or to learn a lesson, or to be punished, or for another reason, then, we should not pray for his healing.” After Fr. Émilien Tardif visited victim soul Marthe Robin, he told me that he did not offer to pray for her recovery because the physical suffering was her ministry.

One exception to the need for diligent discernment is the end of one’s life. When a Christian knows that he is in his last days, little discernment is required to choose to offer up this trying time for his salvation and the salvation of others. It is also perfectly acceptable to offer up one’s persecution, other suffering

associated with living in a fallen world, and self-privations that do not constitute self-harm.

**Revoke it to Allow Healing:** Frequently, when I prayed for someone's physical healing and he was not healed, I would ask him if he had "offered his suffering to God for a spiritual blessing." When he said, "Yes," I explained the situation, "This is a possible obstacle to your healing." If he replied that he did not know this and now he regrets having done so, I suggested a solution. I asked him to let me be his spiritual director for five minutes. Thus, it gave me spiritual authority over him. Then, in my authority as a believer, I would cancel this promise, I would declare this agreement he made with the LORD to be void, I would command his body, his soul, and his spirit not to take it into account, and then I would command the illness to be healed. I would pray again for his physical healing. In the days and weeks that followed, the supplicant would usually be healed of the illness.

Newly armed with this knowledge, the redemptive sufferer who desires to heal and sees that offering up his illness had been an obstacle to God's healing action can now revoke this offering. To do it on his own, I would propose these words, "Heavenly Father, I repent of offering up my illness to You without prudentially discerning whether it was Your will. I believe now that it was not and that You want to heal me. Please forgive me in the Name of Jesus. I offer up to You my fasts, my alms-giving, and the persecution I receive for the salvation of souls and my sanctification but I revoke offering up my illness. I command my body, soul, and spirit to be free from the vow that I have revoked. I give You, LORD, permission to heal me in the Name of Jesus. Amen."

**Healing glorifies God** and testifies to His goodness Jn 9:3 more powerfully than our suffering. Moreover, He almost always wants to heal us. God calls the Church to heal the body **and** the soul in the Name of Jesus.

<sup>1</sup> Michael Scanlan, T.O.R. and Anne Thérèse Shields, R.S.M., *And Their Eyes Were Opened: Encountering Jesus in the Sacraments*, 1976, p. 96–97

<sup>2</sup> Instruction on Prayers for Healing, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Vatican, 2000; [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20001123\\_istruzione\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20001123_istruzione_en.html)