

1-1

David Heighway

MEDICINE AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

I went to my first Catholic mass on Mar. 28 at 4:00. The attendance was sparse, maybe about 20 people. I found out during the service that it was Lent. Father Allard conducted the service with what was truly a devout air. He has a great bass voice which resonates throughout the church. I thought a few of the parishoners were just going through the motions, but, as Father Allard said during the sermon, it takes a strong believer to go to church on Wednesday night. After the service there was a supper. I met several of the people and they were very friendly. I noticed they did not start until the priest said to. I spoke with Father Allard and set up an appointment on Saturday at 7:30 after the Mass.

I find it interesting how a close environment like a church can exist in an essentially transient environment like a college. The uniformity of the service is probably one influence. No matter where one goes, there will be the holy water, genuflecting, and other things necessary to the Catholic ritual. Kipling has one of his characters state it this way: "I hold by the Ould Church, for she's the mother of them all--ay, an' the father, too. I like her bekase she's most remarkable regimental in her fittings. I may die in Honolulu, Nova Zambra, or Cape Cayenne, but wherever I die, me bein' fwhat I am, a priest handy, I go under the same orders an' the same words an' the same unction as tho' the pope himself come down from the dome of St. Peter's to see me off."¹ A church service can have a very soothing feel to it. About halfway through the Wednesday service, they did a chant or hymn that was very nice even with those few voices.

1-2

My second mass was Saturday night. Interestingly enough, the reading and the sermon dealt with healing. They used John:9 which was about Jesus healing a blind man. It said He spat on the ground, made mud, put some on the man's eyes, and told him to wash in a certain well. The service was much the same order as Wednesday's except there were a few more people. Afterwards, I was invited to supper with Father Allard and a few of the student helpers. They were a warm, open group. After supper I sat down with Father Allard and asked him some questions. He began by talking about the need for spritual healing as well as physical healing. He said this was connected with the concept of holistic healing, that the well-being of the mind can influence the well-being of the body. He then descibed the sacrament for the sick. It is called "Annointing the Sick" and it involves placing a drop of oil on the forehead and hands of the person while reciting the intercession. Before Vatican II, when Father Allard first learned it, it was called Extreme Unction and oil was placed on each of the five senses because the sin entered the body through one of the senses. The name was changed to make it sound less severe, but it is still only used on persons who are very ill and close to dying. It can be used on the aged because the ageing process, in a sense, can be considered a weakening of the body bringing one closer to death. The use of this sacrament was illustrated by a story that Father Allard told about himself. When he was a younger priest, he was called once to a hospital where a woman was gravely ill. Her appendix had been removed and peritonitis had set in. She was unconscious but was thrashing about on the bed from the pain. He delivered what was then Extreme Unction and told the sister in charge that

that he would be back in the morning to check on the patient. The sister said she probably would not live through the night. Father Allard said he would be back anyway because he noticed as he was finishing the sacrament, the woman suddenly calmed down. When he returned the next morning, the woman was awake and recovering. He explained that it was not he who had brought about the cure, but that it was the sacrament. He said all healing comes from God. Since the Sacraments are what Jesus did while he was on Earth, when somebody else does likewise, he is merely assisting the process. The concept that all healing comes from God is central to Father Allard's philosophy on healing. He then spoke of the quote from the bible that most healers use, James;5:14,15. We dicussed the miraculous cures and he said that cures must be confirmed by a Jewish doctor, a Protestant doctor, an atheist doctor, and other impartial observers. A miracle has to be something very out of the ordinary.

We then moved to saints and special days starting with St. Blaise (Feb. 3), the blessing of the throats. He said the legend was that a boy with a fishbone in his throat was brought to the saint. It was lodged severely and the boy was in danger of dying. The saint did the anointing procedure and the boy was cured. So now on the saint's day, many catholics get their thoats blessed. It involves holding two candles to the throat and the preist saying a special blessing. This is not exactly healing, but is more like preventative medicine. Father Allard said he could not think of of any more days like that celebrated regularly in the United States, but many small villages in Europe have several days like that. He said, however, that there were many individual blessings. He

then brought out a book called The English Ritual, which contained all of these blessings in Latin and English. He pointed out that there was a blessing for a woman before and after childbirth. He said the one for after childbirth was based in the Old Testament. A woman was to bring her child to the temple (now church) forty days after it had been born to be blessed by the Elders. He also showed the blessing for holy water in which the idea of healing is very important.

I then asked about the articles one sees in the newspaper want-ads where someone thanks a certain saint for favors granted. He said these were done by certain individuals asking a certain saint to intercede in their behalf and ask God to cure someone. Since the cures can only come from God, the saint is just a go-between because they are close to God. Often the family says a novena, which is a nine day prayer, and if the person is cured when they are done, they will do the ad thanking the saint.

I finished by asking about medals and conflicts within the church over healing. He said the medal were not for healing, but more for peace of mind and protection. He stated clearly that there were no conflicts in the church about healing. He said that the church realizes that the writers of the Bible were writing spiritual truths and not physical truths. He said the church tries to move with the times and jokingly cited the Galileo case as an example. We finished the interview, I thanked him, and left. I attended the mass that Sunday, but it was a repeat of the night before with more people in the church.

Father Allard is an intently devout man, as a priest should be. The feeling I got was that he believes in miraculous healings,

1-5

but that they should be treated the same as ordinary healings because it all comes from God. He said that people like snake-handlers are tempting fate. The chapel in Bowling Green is referred to as a mission. Since this is not a heavily catholic area, the church does not have the influence it has in some areas. His strongest parishoners are a small group of college students. They were the ones I met at dinner Saturday night. The end product of these varying influences is a young, modern church with a series of temporary parishoners. Nevertheless, it is a strong and traditional church. The students attend all of the necessary services and are very close to Father Allard. I feel they would accept most rules about health that the church would have. Fortunately, most of the rules are preventative and for peace of mind, which is really, after all, what a church is about.

1. Rudyard Kipling, "On Greenhow Hill", The Courting of Dinah Shadd, (New York, 1930), 75.