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## Book Review of *Healing* by Francis MacNutt

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## Book Review

# Healing

by Francis MacNutt, O.P.

Ave Maria Press, 1974

Man of the '70's may be growing less sure of himself and of his ability to pick himself up by his own bootstraps, but for the most part he tends to greet reports of "miraculous" healing with a knowing contempt. Still such reports do persist, and there is a growing awareness that not all of them originate among the economically deprived, the intellectually benighted, the emotionally unstable, nor even from adherents of "far out" or esoteric religious sects.

One might expect that, in a cultural environment based on empirical science, those scholars who actively dedicate themselves to bettering the human condition could least afford an aprioristic judgment that such healings are impossible. As Dr. Morton Kelsey (*Healing and Christianity*, p. 307) has pointed out: "Either there is a place for Christian healing in today's world or there is not, and this can only be decided on facts." It is a strange commentary on modern thought, but

it is nevertheless true that the pure scientist is at least as likely to admit the failure of the scientific method to provide an answer to man's deepest needs as is the rationalistic theologian.

In *Healing* Father Francis MacNutt, O.P., presents us with an account of his own experience in a ministry of Christian healing as well as with some theological considerations that both locate his ministry solidly within Roman Catholic tradition and at the same time call into question some values long considered as Christian. A graduate of Harvard with an M.A. from the Catholic University of America and a Ph.D. from the Aquinas Institute of Theology, Fr. MacNutt offers a great deal for consideration.

Far from finding himself at odds with the medical and psychological sciences, Fr. MacNutt is at pains both to encourage collaboration of medical science and religious practice, and to acknowledge that divine healing can and does take place not only through

prayer but also through the practice of all the healing arts. There is here no question of a God "out there" breaking into the physical world, no question of some sort of "manipulation" of the divinity by means of magic; rather

The arts of medicine, counseling and psychiatry are ordinary ways in which God can work to create wholeness in broken man through freeing the forces of nature (which he also has created) to move toward health. Unless there is some obstacle, nature (man's body, mind, emotions) moves toward health; the doctor or counselor works to uncover these obstacles whether they be a virus or a painful past, in order that the patient might grow toward that same health for which we pray (pp. 273-4).

Healing is an integral part of the Good News; its purpose, to restore to man the wholeness God created him to enjoy, in body as well as in soul or spirit. In recent centuries, unfortunately, an over-emphasis on the doctrine of the Cross has caused many sincere Christians to reject prayer for healing as being, if not somewhat cowardly, at least far less perfect than to accept suffering as a sign of God's special love. At the same time the ancient heresy that matter is evil has influenced many to go on viewing the body as the prison of the soul, as an evil to be subdued, rather than as an integral element of the human person.

Suffering is basically to be understood as a symptom of disorder. As such it may indeed indicate a call to recognize one's share in fallen humanity and to

unite oneself to the passion and death of the Crucified (redemptive suffering); but suffering may also point to our own failure to live in harmony with God with neighbor, with self. It is the latter — and probably more common — case that may indicate an area in one's life that needs restoration to right order if man is to fulfill his destiny as a child of God. Suffering that prevents one from doing God's will (e.g., a state of depression stemming from some long forgotten childhood trauma) cannot be part of that will (pp. 75-6).

Jesus' own ministry involved not only the proclamation of the Good News by means of the Word but also the evidence of the Kingdom of God's having arrived by means of his "works of power." It was this Good News in action that expressed his mission: the restoration of wholeness to the entire man. Jesus came not only to give new life, but also to remove the obstacles to that new life; the Acts of Apostles demonstrates that the early Church carried out that same ministry of word and work; the Church today, if it be authentic, must continue to proclaim that same message and to perform those same works. Modern man is seeking and demanding that religion provide him with an experience of God as well as with a doctrine about God, and that the Church recognize his need for transforming spiritual power as well as for

the strengthening of his will-power:

If the Good News is that Christ came to save all men, then the power to save has to be there. If the power to save man extends to the whole person, part of the very message of salvation is that Christ came to heal us — spirit, mind, emotions, and body. To deny or minimize the healing ministry is to take away much of the power of the gospel and to leave in its stead a body of truths devoid of life (p. 94).

Or, as he had previously stated, a doctrine of God's salvation not actually taking place, or a concept of healing without the healing taking place, is empty rhetoric (p. 56). Sickness is a result of man's fall, healing of the resurrection.

Father MacNutt is at his best when he writes of the interconnectedness of causes and effects in the human person: the physical, the emotional, the psychological, the spiritual, each acting and reacting on the other; each necessary to the total well-being of the individual; each capable of harming, even of destroying, the whole; yet each open to the healing power of the Savior, as to but one effect of man's encounter with the risen Lord.

Although he is quite explicit in stating his conviction that prayer for healing does tap "forces far beyond what our unaided humanity contributes" (p. 15), Father MacNutt is careful to attribute the vast majority of healing to the powers bestowed on nature by the Creator, powers that can be made operative and/

or more effective through prayer.

The ideal, it seems to me, would be when we reach a time when doctors, counselors and psychiatrists would — as some already do — pray for the patients that God might do what they cannot do, or even that God might perform that same kind of cure that medical science can provide, but in a more perfect, more speedy, and less expensive way (p. 274).

Where psychology, for example, has been able to bring about a better understanding of man's problems but is as yet unable to provide a completely satisfactory solution, the Gospel can provide the clue for bringing the power of divine healing to bear (p. 271), to a far greater extent than is explicable by the power of suggestion alone. Or in the case of physical healings, most

can be explained in a variety of ways. Who can say that we know all the factors of a case, so that we can say with certainty, "This remission of disease took place following prayer and therefore prayer caused it to take place"? But I do believe that anyone who would come with me on retreat after retreat would see so many blessed by healings that he would see a cumulative body of evidence all pointing in the direction of an extraordinary power being present, of a number of healings taking place well beyond the realm of chance occurrence (p. 31).

Healing, then, is understood neither as a sign of the sanctity of the "healer" nor even, at least primarily, as a "proof" of God's presence; rather it is viewed as a sign of the Father's compassion and love for his children.

It is regrettable that Father MacNutt was not more careful to qualify statements (cf. e.g., pp. 62, 78) that imply that Jesus healed all the sick he encountered during his ministry (John 5:1-9 describes one such occasion when Jesus healed only one man of the many who were waiting for the waters of the Sheep Pool to be stirred); although it will be clear to those who read the entire book that such is not his position (cf. for example the paragraphs on redemptive suffering, pp. 86-87), there will not be lacking those who will cite these statements out

of context in order to support the contention that only those who lack faith must go on suffering. Likewise he could well have devoted more space to the relation of the Sacraments to healing, particularly the Eucharist.

Nevertheless all who are involved in the care of the sick—whether in body, in soul or in spirit—can be grateful to Father MacNutt for having shared his insights into an area too long neglected by Catholic thought.

**Reviewed by:**

**Louis P. Rogge, O. Carm.**

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