“Bringing the Healing Presence of Lourdes to the World”
Homily for the Closing Mass of the 2011 Order of Malta Lourdes Pilgrimage
Feast of Saints Philip and James
May 3, 2011

Introduction

This being my first visit to Lourdes in 32 years, and longer and more involved than my first visit, I have a lot of experience to process. One thing for sure is that this pilgrimage has given me the occasion to reflect a lot on the phenomenon of illness, and in particular, to reflect on how we from our Christian/Catholic perspective understand illness and how we regard those who are ill.

The Christian View

As I participated in the various liturgies and other special, moving events of this pilgrimage, I couldn’t help but think of how this view contrasts with the contemporary, secular understanding of illness and of health care in general. I thought of how so many of these events and practices of ours would seem incomprehensible, and even a waste of time, to those with a secular mindset, that is, one which completely removes faith from the picture.

We began on the first full day of our pilgrimage with the ceremony of the washing of feet – the healthy lowering themselves to be servants of the sick. According to the secular way of looking at it, helping the sick could be a rewarding job for some, maybe even a meritorious thing, but to lower oneself to become a servant of those who are disadvantaged? Such an attitude does not understand the concept of humble servanthood. Notice how to wash one’s feet, one must literally lower oneself, get down on one’s knees. Only faith can understand the primacy of this disposition.

We also at that time provided the opportunity for the sacrament of Reconciliation, something certainly incomprehensible to the extreme for those without a faith perspective. If the secular mindset can grasp the concept of sin at all, it certainly would not see it has having anything to do with illness, but rather would see these as completely separate issues. We who are aided by the light of faith, though, realize that the reality of original sin has weakened our human nature in every way, and manifests itself in all of the different dimensions of our human nature. While physical illness usually is not the result of one’s moral faults, it still is an effect of the fall of our first parents. To put it in contemporary jargon, our Catholic understanding is a very holistic one: true good health is a matter of healing at all levels of our existence – spiritual, physical, moral, emotional and so forth.

We even have a special sacrament for those who are physically ill, which we also celebrated during our pilgrimage here. The Church serves those who are needy in every way, fulfilling the mandate our Lord gives us in the parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25 and carrying out the various corporal works of mercy. However, the Church does not have a special sacrament for anyone else who is in any of these other conditions of special need: not for the economically poor, the homeless, those in prison, not even for those suffering emotional or spiritual distress. Only those who are seriously ill physically (and, by extension, mentally) receive a sacramental anointing to signify and effect not only the grace of healing our Lord offers us but also a certain consecration, being set apart for a sacred purpose, to afford us all the opportunity to respond to our call to holiness.
And then there were the processions. From the standpoint of the secular world view, these at best might be seen as quaint but antiquated folkloric customs, without any significance beyond that. For us, though, they are a sacramental reality, in that they make present to us the truth of who we are: a people on a pilgrimage to our true homeland. Here we will always be incomplete and disadvantaged, but with God’s grace we make progress in becoming the people He calls us to be, progress toward His eternal Kingdom, where every flaw will be mended, every hurt healed and every injustice rectified.

Even the very terminology we use is beyond the comprehension of the secular mindset. We refer to you as our “beloved malades (sick).” For those who do not bring the perspective of faith to the question of illness and health care, illness does not in and of itself make one beloved; sure, the sick are beloved to their loved ones, but not necessarily to all, at least, not for the very reason that they are sick. Rather, the sick are seen simply as people who have a problem to be solved. For us, though, you are beloved because you reveal the face of the suffering Christ, calling you to participate in his Passion in this particular way – as Bishop Olmsted said at the beginning of Mass, this is an apostolic mission on your part. And for us, it gives us the opportunity to share love of Christ, becoming a true encounter with Christ and therefore making us more human. It is a part of that mysterious, supernatural reversal of fortunes of which Mary’s Magnificat is so emblematic: those who are ill become the ministers to those who are caring for them.

Another experience of mine on this pilgrimage is that I averted to a fact about Lourdes that, while I suppose I did know it, I never really noticed it before: miraculous healing was not explicitly mentioned as a part of the message. How is it, then, that this place has become renowned as a place of healing, both spiritual and physical?

The answer, I believe, is presence: here is the presence of she who gave the world its Savior. That very presence is healing. Our Savior’s name is “Emmanuel,” which is translated both as “God is with us” and “God saves.” At this place is the presence of the one who gave presence to our Savior here in our world, and this presence is already a powerful source of healing.

**Apostolic Mandate**

The quality of this presence is active. We have all experienced this in our own lives, for example, when trying to console a friend at the loss of a loved one, or when we ourselves have lost a loved one: words fall far short, what is most important is just simply to be together. This active presence is a pattern I have also seen repeated all around here this week among all of you: your caring presence to our beloved malades, shown through all of the TLC, the smiles, the attentiveness. This was very moving for me, subtle yet powerful, and I feel humbled by the example you have set for me.

This is the healing that the world needs. The secular mentality, precisely because it takes faith out of the picture, will never get us there. No matter how good the intentions may perhaps be at times, it will always end up, at best, falling far short, and more often, in dehumanizing us.

How appropriate that we celebrate this closing Mass of our pilgrimage on the feast day of, not one, but two, apostles. The apostles were commissioned by our Lord to bring the saving Good News to all the world. We have experienced the healing presence of this sacred place, but now we need to bring it to the world. This is what will demonstrate this place has changed us – and the world needs to know what this change is all about.

Our Lord assures us in the Gospel that anything we ask of him in his name, he will do it. Because we have faith, we know this does not mean that he is some sort of an
inexhaustible ATM machine! Those without faith would see it this way: it’s all about what I want, and so God must give it to me, and if He doesn’t He must not exist or, even if He does, not be worth believing in. No, our Lord says that we must ask in his name, that is, ask in faith, asking whatever we do be in accord with God’s will.

**Conclusion**

Thank you for doing God’s will. Whether stating it explicitly with words or not, by your actions and your very presence, you have asked in His name, and He has blessed you. May He in turn bless the world through us, as we return home to make his peace and healing presence real to those we encounter in our day-to-day lives.