

Coping with illness



A personal approach

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Preface

Ever since 1960 I've been in and out of hospitals and nursing homes. When, as a young Dominican priest, I was having major convulsions resulting from a tropical fever, I was told that I would probably never improve. At the age of 30 I foresaw decades of empty distress ahead of me. How could I possibly cope? But after much prayer and hard thinking I came to realise that God was calling me, not to an empty useless future, but to the special and difficult vocation of following the crucified Christ. People like me had a special role to play in the life of the Church. All the pain, frustration and distress would demand great docility and resilience in accepting God's plan for me.

Thank God that I did not follow the doctor's dire prediction that I would never recover and work again. After several years of convalescence, I was moved to Spode Conference Centre in Staffordshire. There I gained a new lease of life. Apart from a few lapses in my health, I was able to do quite a bit of work including helping teenagers to discuss what it would mean for them as Christians to move into the adult world, perhaps away from home. I also led courses on 'A Level' Scripture and gave retreats.

Now that, as the Psalmist says, ***'I am old and grey-headed'*** (Ps. 71. 18) my episodes of residential care have multiplied, and I write this from the private home in which I may well spend the

rest of my days. During this period, I have reflected on my reactions to this experience and have posted them on Facebook. Since these were well received, I have gathered them into the present pamphlet in the hope that they may reach and help a new readership. In this I'm trying to fulfil one of our Dominican mottos, ***"To hand on to others the fruits of our contemplation."***

This pamphlet would complement a book my Dominican twin brother, Peter, and I wrote, entitled ***'The Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy.'*** There we argued that it was an essential mark of the Church that we Christians should show God's sons and daughters His practical help in their need. In giving assistance we identify with Christ, the Good Physician. The present pamphlet contains my reflections on what it's like to be confined to a nursing home or hospital bed. Here I need, seek and receive help, rather than give it. Here we identify with Christ in His weakness and vulnerability.

1. Meeting God in a Hospital Ward

“I’m sure being a hospital patient will help you in your work as a hospital chaplain.” Words of comfort from a friend trying to help me make the best of what was a very distressing time. Hopefully he was right. But, after being a patient several times, I’ve discovered a hospital is a rigorous school and the lessons we may learn there may not be the ones we would expect or welcome.

The most general lesson is what it’s like to be weak and vulnerable to illness, dependent upon others for even our most basic needs. We do tend to take our strength so much for granted – until we become unable to do anything for ourselves. Illness involves a loss of freedom and privacy. We hate having to ask for assistance – it’s humiliating, and we feel such a nuisance.

And, in hospital, time does drag. There’s the stress and fear of waiting for the result of tests. The imagination can run wild. And until we’ve been diagnosed we can’t be treated. Nor can we begin to come to terms with our medical problem until it has been defined. During this period, I had to try to place myself in God’s hands and accept whatever He asked of me. Such trust is very difficult.

Long inactivity can make life seem so empty. Friends have envied my having nothing to do, when I have longed to be able to do something, anything. They've told me I've got plenty of time to pray. But strangely, God can seem so distant when we are in special need of His support. Prayer can be very difficult. And I felt guilty about that – until I learnt not to expect too much of myself. St Paul says a groan can be very eloquent, and God understands it. Long before ecumenism became respectable my uncle – a Methodist minister – visited me in hospital. He told me not to worry if I couldn't pray. He assured me that not only was the whole Church praying for me, but it was also doing my praying for me.

It came as a shock to realise that I didn't cope with illness as well as I had expected. At times I was afraid and confused, overwhelmed with questions about suffering, and yet didn't have the mental strength to answer them. As a priest I'd spent years reflecting on the problem of suffering and yet, when I became ill, the standard answers didn't ring true, even though I knew they were. But I was in no condition to take them in. I resented healthy people who told me what I already believed, but found so hard to accept. I hope, when I visit the sick, I will have the sense not to choke the poor patient with theology, when what he needs most is a friend to hold his hand and pray with him!

And I have needed a spiritual kick in the pants from a good priest friend. He needed to tell me to stop thinking I was

stronger than Christ in Gethsemane, or nailed to the cross, wondering why his heavenly Father had forsaken him. If Christ could weep, why should I be ashamed to shed tears of despair and panic? I had to learn to accept that I was human. That means being emotionally and physically weak and vulnerable. And without really understanding how, I could identify with the crucified Christ, just as He identified with me.

Those who cared for me in hospital helped me to overcome the indignities of sickness. The nurses and doctors reflected and continued Christ's compassionate ministry to the sick. They were much more than competent professionals. The respect they showed me helped me retain my own self-respect, when my morale was low. In them I met Christ, the Good Physician, and in my fellow patients in my ward, as we encouraged and supported each other with humour and compassion. Also, in the friends who visited me. So, too, Christ came to me in the priest anointing me with the Sacrament of the Sick and giving me Holy Communion. I have seen and experienced the peace and strength the Sacrament of the Sick brings to those who are very ill.

If I met the compassionate Christ in these people who helped and supported me in so many different ways, I also found him in my fellow patients. Christ identified with us in our weakness and suffering. And we could identify with Him. From the crucified Christ I learnt that the Son of God was most powerful when He seemed to be utterly helpless. That's when He saved

the world. Isaiah assures us, ***‘in quietness and in trust shall be your strength,’*** (Is.30. 15). And one of the psalms urges us, ***‘Be still and know that I am God, supreme among the nations,’*** (Ps. 46. 10), and therefore in control of what to me seemed to be absolute chaos. It’s a difficult and demanding vocation to share in the work of the suffering Christ, especially when we can’t really understand how our suffering can benefit ourselves or anyone else.

I needed to be reduced to helpless inactivity before I could learn to place my hope in God’s strength, rather than my own – to accept His wisdom when I couldn’t understand what was happening to me. That goes against the grain, since we all want to be in control of our lives. To say, ‘Thy will be done’ – and really mean it – is the most difficult of prayers.

Sickness does change our perspective as to what’s really important in life. When, for example, we struggle for breath or are in great pain, we stop worrying about the trivial irritants of life. Then we wonder why we used to make such a fuss about things that don’t really matter. And if we are facing possible death, the only thing that matters is eternal life.

Not that any of these insights came as a blinding revelation. It was much more a case of later realising that Christ had been with me, supporting me, even though at the time I did not appreciate it. Hopefully, I will remember this, if I ever have to return to hospital. Then, in the lonely, drawn-out watches of

the night and of the day, in the frustration of weakness and pain, I hope I will recall the words of Jacob, ***“Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it! ... How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven”*** (Gen. 28. 16-18). For me, that place was a hospital ward.

2. *“The Autumn of My Content”*

(with apologies to Richard III)

Today I’m going to share with you how I, as an 88-year-old Christian, approach ageing. I hope this will help those of you who are facing the same situation, as well as younger people, in understanding and caring for us. I’ve entitled my reflection, ‘The Autumn of my Content.’

Let’s face it. Much of our lives are uneventful. Hopefully we do have high points when we can celebrate and enjoy ourselves. But for much of the time we live a monotonous routine. We may well ask, ‘What’s the point?’

The Church comes up with a brilliant answer. It sanctifies the tedium of life with what we call ‘Ordinary Time’. That’s when we’re not preparing for great liturgical festivals or actually celebrating them, but just getting on with the routine of following Jesus in our daily lives.

About 30 years of His short life were as mundane and humdrum as ours. From infancy, through childhood, youth and manhood He was being prepared to carry out His saving mission. Each stage of that preparation was vital to His success.

For Jesus and for us, Ordinary Time is Sacred Time. It's in the routine of our daily lives that we love and serve God and each other. In this He draws close to us, and we to Him. Each stage of our Ordinary Time is meant to help us on our journey to the Kingdom of Heaven. The routine will vary as we develop and grow from being an infant, then a child, then an adult.

As I approached 86 I had a special interest in making sense of what the Ordinary Time of ageing can mean for me and others like me. With God's help I needed to see if the autumn of my life could become the fruitful and positive climax to my vocation to follow Christ ... whether, in the words of Keats, the poet, the autumn of my life could become a season of 'mellow fruitfulness.'

Increasingly that means not being active, but sharing in our Saviour's weakness and vulnerability. Through us sick and frail people the Church identifies with the crucified Christ and shares in His redemptive suffering, (cf. Col. 1. 24). We are called to witness that lives like ours are not a meaningless waste, but an essential part of the life of the Church. Ours is a

difficult vocation; we need and value the respect and support of those who are active.

People like me are often accused of living in the past. Certainly, we can be crashing bores as we reminisce about the good old days. But for most of us oldies our faith shifts our perspective. Instead of looking back, we look forward. We're not so much preparing for death, but for eternal life. As I contemplate the sunset of death I look forward to the sunrise of the resurrection. My longing to dwell in the house of the Lord increases as that approaches. I'm like a tired old horse which gets excited as it nears home!

One of the things about extreme old age is that you survive your contemporaries. Gradually they're stripped away and you're left alone. Since they were part of our lives, with their death, part of us dies. And in many other ways ageing strips us of our various props and supports. That must mean coming to terms with my mind and various parts of my body wearing out and breaking down. My hearing has become very poor. It's frustrating and lonely, not being able to join in conversations.

For me, the Ordinary Time of ageing forces me to let go, to give back to God – my physical and mental strengths, my loved ones, my mobility, the opportunities to be an active Dominican.

The more I have to surrender, the more I'm challenged to trust, to believe that God's loving hands will sustain me and

bring me to my heavenly home with Him. As death knocks away the final prop, I'm called to pray with the dying Jesus, "Father, into your hands I commend my life, and death."

Letting go of everything and trusting in the Lord – that's what I must do during the Ordinary Time, the autumn, of my Old Age. In this the Lord gives me a deep peace, underlying all the frustrations.

May He grant my fellow oldies the same peace. God bless you!

3. The Twilight of My Content

I wrote the above reflection over a year ago, for the beginning of what the Church calls Ordinary Time, and with apologies to Shakespeare's *Richard III*, who complained about his Winter of Discontent.

A little over a year later I have moved from my autumn to my Twilight of Content, as I approach the end of my life on earth.

In the tropics, twilight is very short and descends swiftly. It's pitch black by 6pm. But in the temperate climate of the UK it can still be reasonably light at 10pm. When my twin brother Peter was on holiday here from the West Indies we used to

love to sit, with a mug of coffee, on the patio at Holy Cross Priory, at that hour.

When I wrote about Ordinary Time, I saw it as reflecting the routine of our daily lives, when nothing dramatic happens. That's when God usually approaches us and we meet, love and serve Him. That encounter transforms Ordinary Time into 'Sacred Time'. This, of course, varies and develops for each of us, depending upon our changing circumstances and age. The Ordinary Time for a toddler, a teenager and mature adult will each provide its own opportunities and graces. That was as true for Jesus as for us.

With this new year I consider I have passed from my autumn of Ordinary Time to its twilight, during which the sun is sinking on my present earthly life. This, I realise, may come either like the tropical or temporal twilight – suddenly and swiftly, or slowly and gradually creeping up on me. The former was the case for my brothers Geoff and Peter, the latter for my brother Chris and, seemingly, me – though I could suddenly die at any moment.

What do I think about this uncertainty? Well, obviously, God decides when I am to die, not me. I must have the docility to say, 'Not my will, but yours be done.' This I gladly do. I am content, at peace, to leave the time of my death to God. Would I prefer to die sooner or later? The simple, honest answer is, 'sooner.' Certainly, I'm wearied by the increasing pain and number of setbacks in my health. I long for that to

end. But much more importantly I long to be in the heavenly home for which God created me and for which my Saviour lived and died to win for me. Confident in His infinite love and mercy for me personally, not what I, a sinner, deserve, I eagerly, frequently echo the closing words of the Bible, ***'Come, Lord Jesus, come'*** (Rev. 22 20).

But I am a firm believer that if God has placed me in a certain situation that's where He wants me to serve Him. It would seem as though God is prolonging my twilight. So that challenges me to discover the opportunity that provides for me to do His will.

As we grow older, we become increasingly dependent on others. We have to hand over to others the freedom we took for granted. My deteriorating health means that I can no longer live in my Dominican community but require a specialised around-the-clock nursing home. Though that causes a deep sadness, I accept the need for this decision and am content. Now I'm discovering the nursing home is providing fresh ways of serving God. Since I can no longer care for my basic needs, I depend on nurses to wash and clean me. That requires humility, which is good for me.

I see the caring staff as continuing the healing ministry of Christ, the Good Physician. We, who are sick, identify with Him and He with us, who share His frailty and vulnerability. I consider I've been called to articulate in my prayers the dialogue between Christ the healer and Christ the vulnerable.

Much of the challenge of ageing consists in generously returning to God all that He has given us. Gradually God asks us to return the props and supports which have meant so much to us. This is most poignant and painful when it involves the death of a loved one. That occurred in 2018, when my twin brother, Peter, died unexpectedly of a vicious chest infection. Not only were we identical twins, but we had so much more in common. Together we trained as Dominican priests; together we were sent to work in the West Indies.

During the closing years of our lives, long after illness had forced me to return England, we were able to keep in touch and draw much closer through the wonders of Skype. Across the Atlantic we could see each other and discuss and plan work together. Above all, we were most closely united when we sang the Prayer of the Church together. In Peter I found the best of friends, the ideal person to work with and an inspiration as a fellow Dominican. No wonder I miss him! Sadly, we had another bereavement in the family when our brother David's wife, June, died. For Peter and me she had become a very dear friend, who always made us welcome whenever we spent a holiday with them.

As I've suggested, old age is a time for me to let go, until death strips me of absolutely everything. Now I echo Paul's personal expression of trust, ***'I live now by faith in the Son of God, who loves me and gave Himself up for me'*** (Gal. 2.20).

In our naked emptiness, totally dependent on God, He offers the fullness of life with Him. No wonder I rejoice and am more than content with the twilight of my life! Perhaps He wants me to witness to the peace He gives when we accept His will. But in all honesty, that's not always possible. There are times when I cry to the Lord *out of the depths* of depression and the agony of pain. At the end of this pamphlet I will describe how our crucified Lord helps me to cope with that.

4. *Gíving and Receiving*



The Fifth Station of the Cross means something very special to me. In my weakness I'm very dependent on the help of carers. This could be humiliating, when we all want to be able to stand on our own feet, and wrongly think we are self-sufficient.

But then I gaze at the Fifth Station of the Cross and see the Son of God crushed by the burden of the cross. He who had come to serve, not be served, needed the help of Simon of Cyrene, literally, to help Him back onto His feet. He needed Simon to help Him carry His cross – to complete the journey to Calvary and there save the world from the power of evil.

The Suffering Servant of the Lord was not too proud to accept the service of a stranger, forced to help Him in making His way to Calvary, where He would fulfil the mission given Him by His Heavenly Father. Jesus didn't show resentment and insist that He could manage by Himself. He knew He needed Simon's assistance.

In the Fifth Station of the Cross, there's a meeting between Simon of Cyrene giving Jesus a helping hand and Jesus welcoming that support – a meeting between giving and receiving, serving and being served. In the picture I've chosen, there's a meeting of eyes; Simon looks at Jesus with compassion, Jesus looks at Simon with gratitude.

That has made me realise that Jesus needed and welcomed help throughout His life – most obviously as a baby and child, but also as an adult. That's part of being human. Responding to each other's needs draws us together as families and communities. It's not a sign of weakness, but of collective strength. So, being as human as the rest of us, Jesus sought water from the Samaritan woman when He was tired and thirsty. His mission depended on a back-up supply chain of

supporters. He welcomed and needed friends – Martha, Mary, Lazarus. In Gethsemane He wanted the moral support and prayers of Peter, James and John. As He died on the cross the support of His Mother, a few women and the Good Thief must have meant so much to Him.

Never did Jesus refuse the offer of help. He did not reject the enthusiastic expression of penitent love, expressed by the woman who washed His feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.

If Jesus has taught me that true greatness lies in lovingly, generously serving others, He's also shown me, through the Fifth Station of the Cross, that graciously accepting their care is not degrading. As we follow Jesus on the Way of the Cross we need Him, acting through people like Simon of Cyrene, to help us carry our heavy burdens.

I have found that if I'm treated with respect I don't lose my dignity in being helped, even in my most basic needs. But when Jesus insisted on washing Peter's feet He taught him and us two things. Firstly, we must humbly serve each other, and secondly, we must allow other people to serve us, without our losing our dignity. Before being ready to give, we need to feel what it's like to be on the receiving end.

In this Fifth Station, Jesus and Simon of Cyrene have taught me, and I hope you, the dignity of giving and receiving, serving and being served – both with love and respect.

5. On Becoming Dependent

I'm finding that one of the many hard things about being frail is that I'm rapidly losing my independence. I'm sure the same is true for you. As a student I thought nothing of cycling a hundred miles in a day with a rucksack on my back. Now, at 88, I need round-the-clock care to move me from one side of the bed to the other every-three hours. I need someone to wash and clean me and cater for my basic needs. I'm sure some of you must be much more restricted.

We could find all this very frustrating and humiliating. But I, for one, don't. That's thanks to the carers, who, in many ways, look after me. Each and every one of them treats me with dignity and respect, especially when responding to my personal needs. Their attitude towards me ensures that I don't lose my personal dignity and self-respect. I'm sure the same is true for you and that makes it easier for us in having to cope with depending on others. I, for one, always hate having to ask for help and fear I'm being a nuisance.

I am very aware that I am greatly blessed by being in a nursing home staffed by dedicated, efficient carers, who have become dear friends. I think of and pray for the many who are not so fortunate – for the homeless, who have no one to look after them, for those who are badly neglected, verbally or physically abused either in their own homes or in so-called care homes.

Through them the suffering Christ appeals to His Heavenly Father and to us for compassion.

6. Not Going It Alone

“Lord, save me, I’m sinking!” Peter sums up our desperate need for Christ. To rescue us from the storm-tossed waves which batter us in life. Sickness, anxiety, temptations to sin. We fear that we can’t cope, that we will be overwhelmed. In desperation we cry to the Lord for help. That may be the only time we turn to Him.

Like Peter we may begin to doubt whether Jesus is really with us, or is it just wishful thinking? So, Jesus bids Peter and us to trust Him to enable us to venture across the waves. As long as Peter and we do trust Jesus to support us we can do what is humanly impossible. But then Peter started to think that he was achieving the humanly impossible by himself. Thinking he no longer needing to trust in Christ to support him, he started to sink. In his panic he cried, ***“Save me, Lord,”*** (Matt. 14. 20). Peter had to learn his need for Christ. Then Peter grasped the hand which Jesus stretched out to him.

That clasping of hands sums up our need for Christ and his power to save us. In that meeting we find salvation – if only

we will turn to Him and trust Him. Then we will find we can cope with what seemed to be humanly impossible.

I have found it's a great mistake to look fearfully into what seems a bleak future. We tend only to think in terms of our limitations. We forget that Christ gives us His help when we need it, not before. Instead, He helps us to develop resources we did not know we had, so that with His help we can do the seemingly impossible.

That doesn't always mean that Jesus immediately calms the storm-tossed waves which batter us. At times we may wonder where Christ was when we most needed Him. To each of us He echo the words of the prophet Isaiah, ***'Do not be afraid, I am with you, I am holding you by the hand. Do not be afraid!'*** (Is. 41. 10).

7. Coping with Slowly Dying

A few years ago, the community and I were convinced I was about to die. Father Robert anointed me with the Sacrament of the Sick and said the Prayers of Final Commendation. But I rallied and am still here, though getting worse. As I survive, I seem to have the up and down existence of a switchback, and lose various strengths and abilities.

My prior told me that I should accept that I was dying and must stop fighting death. It may come immediately or be drawn out, and be a painful process. The latter now seems to be the case. He prayed sudden death would bring my suffering to end, and take me home to God. That is what I want.

But Father David did add I now had a special preaching mission – to be a Christian example of how to die! *What, me?* He wanted me to write a kind of chronicle of a pilgrim's decline.

All I can do is to try to give a full and honest account of what I'm experiencing and how I am reacting. Some of what I write you may readily understand; parts may seem fanciful. I leave you to judge.

The prospect of imminent death mightily focuses the mind – so I've been told, and so I've found out. Even the best of us, like Martha, are busy about many good things. The thought of possibly dying very soon sharply focused my mind ***'to spend all the days of my life in the house of the Lord'*** (Ps.27. 4) – one of my constant, favourite prayer texts. That's what I want – what Aquinas wanted – 'nothing but you, Lord'.

The prospect of dying has brought me very close to God's beloved crucified Son, with whom I can now readily identify, especially when I'm screaming with pain. Then I squeeze tightly the Rosary cross which, night and day, is always in one

hand, while I'm telling the beads with the other. Time does drag out with long-term illness.

Each of us will have his own response to all that dying and death involve. You must not try to make mine yours. We must draw on our particular God-centred spirituality. For me, that's Scripture, the Prayer of the Church (Divine Office) and, especially more recently, the Most Holy Rosary.

Remaining in community life provided the context in which my prior, Father David, made this possible. From my room I could hear the church bells, summoning the community to prayer. I could identify with them. Brethren could drop in for a chat or to pray with me – definitely the Dominican atmosphere that meant so much to me.

Now that I need round-the-clock specialised care, which my community cannot give, I've been moved to a nursing home.

You won't find a Breviary or a Bible by my bed. Instead you will find their texts in other formats – I can say the Prayer of the Church using my computer or Kindle. It was with modern technology that I was able to pray with my brother Peter despite him being thousands of miles away. It united us at the deepest level – prayer. So, not only am I equipped to pray the Prayer of the Church but also to read the Bible – a great love of mine, which is standing me in good stead.

If you enter my room, night or day, you will find me holding a Rosary on my chest. In one hand I hold the cross, clutching it very closely, when I'm in pain or going through a period of deep depression. In the other hand I will hold and sometimes pray the Rosary. Often I will appear to be asleep, but not always. I may well be marshalling my thoughts for this task my prior has given me. I don't know how much time is left to me!

I've been told that powerful drugs, especially pain-killers, can produce vivid hallucinations, even when we are fully awake. They certainly can. We need the Holy Spirit to help us to discern which are benign, sinister, or from God.

Often, I sense people near to me speaking to me. I look towards them – no-one there!

Frequently I've felt a reassuring hand placed on mine, especially when I was anxious. I'm sure God was reminding me of Isaiah's ***'Do not be afraid, I am with you. I am holding you by the hand, do not be afraid!'*** (Is. 41. 10) With St Peter I cry, ***'Lord, save me!'*** (Matt. 14.30). I am convinced the Holy Spirit is helping us in our prayers.

Two incidents convince me they, at least, were gifts from God. Make what you like of them. While holding my Rosary and being anxious about those who would never hear the Gospel, I felt clasped hands pressing on mine. I'm sure Jesus and His Mother were assuring me they had got the situation in hand.

And then I'm convinced I clearly saw Jesus walking through the crowd to give me Holy Communion.

I've spoken about what doesn't seem scary. But there's another kind of hallucination, casting doubts on my relationship with God. Would I go to heaven, or not? I am sure these were evil and meant to drive me to despair. All I can say is: 'Trust in the Lord.' He wants us to be a marriage made in heaven, if that's what I really want. I hope and pray I always will.

But we can have hallucinations no less frightening, sometimes with an amusing ending.

I turned in, as usual, praying for a 'quiet night and a perfect end,' with the proviso 'not my will, but thine be done' – the hardest prayer to make and really mean. It requires absolute trust in God. While asleep I saw my community, my carers and, most sinisterly, a surgeon with a saw in his hand. They were having a heated discussion as to whether or not I would benefit by having my seemingly useless legs removed – clearly a sub-conscious fear. But then I screamed, 'Stop! They're my legs. Leave them alone.' They did.

Without warning, the dream changed. I was teaching Jesus where to place His fingers in the cricketer's art of finger spin bowling. He seemed to be very interested and a quick learner.

I don't know what to make of this dream. It has unsettled me sufficiently to revive the memory and to write it down. But I felt I must, if what I record is to give a balanced impression of coping with dying is like for me.

To round off, one of the most moving occasions was the Master General's visiting me. After he had blessed my forehead, I impetuously clasped his hands and broke into tears of joy. St Dominic's actual successor had blessed me and allowed me to hold his hands!

The following conviction has kept me trying to keep a positive approach to dying

God loves me so intensely that He wants to share His whole life and happiness with me; that's what I want above all else – to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life. To be with the God I know loves me, that's all that I want. I share Augustine's conviction: 'O God, You have made me for Yourself and my heart finds no rest until it rests in You.' That conviction can transform periods of pain, loneliness, despair and frustration into sacred time, filled with God's love for me, hopefully mine for Him.

Having so much time on my hands, I sometimes feel guilty at not being able to pray. I should not. Physical and mental lethargy are part of being ill. St Paul reassures us by telling us that, when we can't put our prayers into words, the Holy Spirit

expresses them in groans and knows exactly how we feel (Rom. 8. 26-7).

I've gone as far I can go. The task has left me physically and spiritually drained, but I can do no more – unless I decide something new has turned up, which is worth recording. Otherwise being a long time sick in bed often leaves me feeling rotten, bored, in pain, and lonely. Time does drag. I've written enough about that. Nightly I pray, '*Come, Lord, Jesus, come*' – not always to escape the tedium of living, but always to enjoy the fullness of life in Christ.

Perhaps I need to pray for more time to learn patience!

Later, my death will have provided the conclusion to this chronicle. Please pray for me.

Footnote

Since I wrote some of these reflections my Dominican twin brother, Peter, died [27th March 2018]. That came as a complete shock and left me devastated. We were so close, had so much in common. Though separated by the Atlantic we were able to use Skype to work and pray together. Gradually, since his death, my love for Peter is maturing, as it shifts from his well-being here on earth to now focusing solely on his eternal salvation.

8. *On the Sacrament of the Sick*

The Catholic Church comforts those who are very ill by following the ritual enjoined on us by St James' Letter (Jas. 5. 14-16). In this the priest, acting in the name and power of Christ, the Good Physician, anoints the sick person, while praying for him or her.

That ministry of compassion used to be given the unfortunate, frightening name of 'Extreme Unction' (the 'last anointing'). That suggested we should only receive this beautiful sacrament when we were '*in extremis*' – about to die. Instead of bringing peace and comfort, it added distress to all. Thank God it is now called the 'Sacrament of the Sick.' That implies it is meant to help those who are very sick, and is not reserved only for those who are at their last gasp.

I have a couple of amusing examples from the West Indies of how the old name of 'Extreme Unction' could cause this unfortunate misunderstanding. As I was leaving the home of someone I'd just anointed I was approached by a man with a spade. He'd come to ask me if he should start digging the grave. To which I replied, "No, the sick man is not yet dead."

Then in 1960, while working in Grenada, I became seriously ill with a tropical fever, causing encephalitis. Everyone rightly thought I was in serious danger of death. So I was anointed with the Sacrament of the Sick. Outside my room I could hear

two of the priory cleaners discussing “whether I would be embalmed and flown home to ‘mi mammy’.”

That happened nearly 60 years ago. During that time, I’ve have had many death-threatening illnesses and lost count of the number of times I’ve been anointed. That just goes to show that the beautiful Sacrament of the Sick should not be seen as the harbinger of death; nor should it be left till the sick person is at his last breath before a priest is called. Ideally, the sick person should be sufficiently alert to receive Holy Communion and take an active part in the Sacrament of the Sick.

9. My Dirty Face

Laughter, curiosity and a knowing look. Such were the reactions of my nursing home carers as they gazed at my dirty grey forehead. Those who were Christians realised it was Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. The reactions of those of a non-Christian faith or no faith gave me the opportunity to explain the meaning of the ash cross daubed on my forehead. It was a wonderful sign, pointing to the heart of our Christian faith. It reinforced my faith, raised questions for those who were bewildered by my dirty face.

God, in His wisdom, had placed me in this nursing home and sent a member of my community to sign my forehead with an

ashen cross. I was there to provoke questions, there to provide explanations. I told them the mark on my forehead was a reminder of my mortality and that I would return to dust. But that would not be the end of me. My death would be the gateway to eternal life and happiness with God. This Jesus had won for us through His crucifixion and resurrection, which we would celebrate at Easter. Lent was a special time for us to prepare to celebrate our Saviour's death and resurrection by rejecting what was wrong in our lives, turning to God, asking His forgiveness and helping us to avoid sinning in the future. This change of heart is what we mean by 'repentance' and was traditionally expressed by wearing sackcloth and ashes.

By giving me the opportunity to explain my dirty face God has reassured me that He has a definite purpose for keeping this frail old man – me – alive in a nursing home bed. There my bed is my pulpit; there I am His witness. I am still an active member of the Order of Preachers. Knowing that makes it easier to accept the pain and limitations of old age and illness.

Epilogue: Coping with Suffering

Since I have written about my reaction to suffering, you have every reason to ask me how I cope.

I'm not going to theorise about the metaphysical problem of suffering, which would get me nowhere. Instead, I'm going to reflect on the crucifix on my wall or held tightly in my hand. That shows me how God tackled suffering.

By becoming one of us and nailed to the cross, He embraced it, and all of us sufferers, with open arms. There, the Son-of-God-made-man stretched out one hand to His Heavenly Father and the other to us suffering sinners. There, in His crucified body, He drew us together, uniting God and man in the bond of His divine merciful love for man, in his human love for God. As St Paul tells us, He made our peace with God through the blood of the cross (cf. Col. 1. 20). The crucified Christ took on all the forces of evil arraigned against Him and conquered them by the power of His infinite divine love for us.

St Paul realised this may all seem nonsense to the secular mind, and the idea of God dying on the cross, blasphemous. So he wrote, ***'For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire***

wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.' (1 Cor. 1. 22-25).

'For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom.' In other words, we people cannot understand God and the way He acts. God is a mystery. If we are not to break with God, we must trust His love for us, His judgement in allowing our pain and suffering. We must be prepared to welcome the mystery of God, who is way beyond the power of our very limited human understanding.

In the face of suffering I need Paul's absolute trust in the saving power of the crucified Christ, ***'And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.'*** (Gal. 2. 20). That trust alone can give me the humility to allow the Light of the World to lead me through the darkness of suffering. Only trust in God's wisdom and love can give me the docility to say, and mean, 'Not my will, but yours be done.'

At times of pain or depression, such docile acceptance of God's inscrutable wisdom and love can make our suffering seem so futile, negative and destructive. In attempting to make some sense of this, I return to my crucifix. There I see Christ crucified embracing the destructive futility of suffering

and giving it a positive value, by using it to save the world from all the destructive forces of evil. Through our identifying with the suffering Christ, and He with us, St Paul was able to write, ***‘I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and 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). Not that Christ failed to do enough to save the world, with us suffering sinners having to make up the deficit. No, what’s lacking was the Church’s identifying with the sufferings of the crucified Christ, and so sharing in His work of salvation, in the victory of the cross. To do so is the special vocation of those who suffer.

I have given the background underlying my approach to suffering. When things are bad, I can’t explicitly draw on all this. Instead I cling to my crucifix and beg God to give me the docility to trust His wisdom and love for me. This trust enables me to pray, ‘not my will but yours be done,’ when my life seems to be descending into chaos. This docile trust enables me to cling onto God, whose ways I can’t understand, and to accept that I must learn to live with the incomprehensible mystery of evil. I realise I would be lost if I were to abandon God when I most needed His support. With St Peter I exclaim, ***“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life,”*** (Jn. 6.68) and the Lord, through the prophet Isaiah, reassures me, ***‘Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.’*** (Is. 41. 10).

Please pray for those needing care and for those proving it at home, in a hospital or a nursing home.

God bless you!

Isidore Clarke O.P.



***Let us now conclude these reflections
by praying for those who care for us:***

Heavenly Father,
we who are frail thank you for giving us carers,
who treat us with dignity and respect.
Bless them as they continue to share
the compassion of your Son,
Christ, the Good Physician.

***We also pray for those of us who are frail
and in need of care:***

May we welcome help graciously,
and not despise ourselves
for being dependent on others.

After all, even Jesus,
the Almighty Son of God,
needed Mary and Joseph
to care for Him as a child,
and Simon of Cyrene
to help Him carry the cross,
whereby He saved the world.

We make this prayer through Christ Our Lord. Amen.