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The Healing Ministry of Jesus Christ

"At sunset, all those who had friends suffering from diseases of one kind or another brought them to Jesus and, laying his hands on each, he cured them."

- Luke 4:40


Since its beginnings, the Catholic faith has understood that care for the sick and the dying is part of who we are. The roots of our healing mission lie in the life and ministry of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. In proclaiming the kingdom of God, Jesus had a special place in his heart for those who were overwhelmed by sickness, disfigured by disease or threatened with death.



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Jesus the Healer

Three aspects of Jesus' own ministry to the sick and dying are particularly striking. First, he recognizes the vulnerability of the sick, in their need for care. Jesus touches these people, physically and spiritually, breaking through that barrier of disease which often makes people feel less than human. He touches the leper (Mark 1:41), lays hands on the blind man (Mark 8:22), and takes the hand of the



daughter of Jairus (Luke 8:54). His touch seems to say to them in their wretchedness and isolation: "You are worthwhile. Through God's loving touch, you are whole. I am with you."

Second, Jesus brings the "outcast" back into human society through his healing word and touch. He challenges the notion that sickness is the result of sin. The diseased were thought of as unclean, punished by God and cut off from God's holy people. When his disciples asked, "Lord, who sinned, this man or his parents, for him to be born blind?" (John 9:2). Jesus replied, "Neither he nor his parents sinned." Jesus not only touches the outcasts but welcomes them back into community, into God's own family.

Finally, Jesus reaffirms the need for spiritual healing. The paralytic lowered through the roof is first healed of his sins (Mark 2:5), while the man by the pool at Bethesda is warned, "Give up your sins so that something worse may not overtake you" (John 5:24).

Death itself, the ultimate affront to humanity, is overcome by Jesus. He raised Jairus' daughter (Luke 8:49-56), the widow of Nain's son (Luke 7:11-17), and Lazarus (John 11:38-44). These miracles, of course, only restored earthly life. His own resurrection promises the fullness of eternal life.

God's compassion for all his children is revealed in the human touch of Jesus, in the restoration to community of those considered outcasts, and in the salvific healing of sin and death. This is fundamental to the message of the Gospel.



A Ministry of the Whole Church

Since the time of Jesus, Christians have seen care for the sick as one of the signs of the kingdom of God. In the parable of the Good Samaritan they find a reminder that practical compassion for those in need is at the heart of the Christian mission (Luke 10:30-37). Following the example of Jesus' own actions, the Christian community strives to break down the barriers of isolation felt by those who are sick or dying, to include them as full members of the human community, and to provide hope of an ultimate healing of sin and death. The Church, Christ's Body today, does this through hospitals, continuing care and palliative care facilities, seniors' residences, and through care within the home and the community.

Home care has been a traditional, though often unrecognized, ministry within the Church. To be compassionate, generous and self-sacrificing in the name of Christ is to be Christ for others. Those who show concern for family members, elderly parents, children with disabilities, and sometimes for strangers, ought to be praised for the extraordinary generosity which human frailty can call forth. The provision of such care must not be thought of as simply the responsibility of women; both men and women need to share this mission of service.

Furthermore, it must be recognized that not everyone has a loving family to provide care in the event of illness. When families are overwhelmed by home care needs, our public health care system should support them.

The healing ministry of caring can be instituted by a parish which brings together caregivers and those in need. Even in our parish communities, because our health system is still so geared to acute care, many people are forgotten because they do not have an urgent illness. Some of the elderly eat poorly, or do not get out for lack of a helping hand. Parents of children with handicaps could, at times, use the assistance of a fellow parishioner to deal with the extra challenges they face. We encourage our parishes and our Catholic health institutions to enter into dialogue more and more, so that they may share expertise and build programs that respond to the growing needs at the parish level.

Some parishes are attempting to implement parish nursing. Many others have a pastoral visitation program, bringing Holy Communion and prayer to the sick, to shut-ins, and to the dying. The Sacrament of the Sick is a wondrous gift from



Jesus, to strengthen the afflicted and to bring about healing in body and spirit. Prayer is, and always has been, a key component of the healing ministry of Our Lord. Our communities regularly pray for the sick and dying.

Professional spiritual care in institutions is also gradually becoming more available in our communities, as the need becomes increasingly acknowledged. Home-centred palliative care for the dying and their families is being complemented by hospice care. Creative individuals, groups, and parishes are listening to Jesus tell anew the parable of the Good Samaritan, and are responding by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus Lives in Our Changing History

In the Church's history, religious orders have often devoted themselves to the healing ministry of Christ. When the earliest bishops across this country saw their people's need for proper compassionate health care, the religious sisters responded to the challenge to care for God's children, regardless of poverty, isolation, or distance. The sisters' hospitals and continuing care facilities became places of hope for the sick, the elderly, and their families. Many who grew up in Alberta have been touched by the care of these sisters at the time of birth, during serious illness, when struggling with chronic ailments, and when dying. The province of Alberta has been blessed with a long history of dedication by religious orders of women to the care of the

sick and the dying. Their legacy of loving service remains to evoke our gratitude, and to guide us into the future.

Today, Catholic health care in the name of Jesus is flourishing, but it is changing. Perhaps the most obvious difference from 50 years ago is the diminishing presence of religious sisters in the healing ministry. Where the sisters often administered hospitals and nursing homes, provided the nursing care, assisted in spiritual care along with the local priests, and looked after the feeding, cleaning, and maintenance within these institutions, it is not uncommon to find only a handful of sisters still active today. Less obvious but equally true, however, is the increasing number of lay people who, inspired by the example of the sisters, and by the Church's call for a new evangelization, are consciously choosing to be part of the healing ministry of the Lord.

Today the Holy Spirit beckons the Church in dynamic new ways. Catholics and fellow Christians recognize the continuing need for the healing touch of Jesus in both our institutions and our communities. The Alberta bishops have played their role in the transition to lay-operated, mission-inspired health care institutions by creating an ownership group, the Alberta Catholic Health Corporation, which continues to sponsor the professional ministry of care. Parishes and many lay people are beginning to see anew their own part in answering God's call for the faithful to be healers. The Gospel mission is the key.

The Healing Ministry

Our Catholic health care institutions need the public support of our faithful. These facilities are a living witness to the Church's healing presence. We encourage all Catholics to grow in awareness and understanding of the Church's mission of healing, and to know and identify with our Catholic hospitals and facilities. They are listed at the end of this letter.

The mission of healing, in the spirit of the Gospel, needs committed professionals and caring volunteers. It also requires financial support (especially where public monies are not forthcoming, as often happens with spiritual care), and a trust that the whole Church, not just a few administrators or professionals, carries the responsibility for continuing the healing ministry of Christ.

Health care today is very much a field of professionals. Proper care demands proper training, accreditation, ability and compassion. These are all a part of healing and as such receive the full support of the Church. The work of trained professionals is one of God's ways of healing in our world. Hospitals and continuing care facilities are the most obvious way in which professional skills are organized for proper care of the sick and the dying. Catholic institutions must exhibit the highest possible standards for care, at least the equivalent of those expected in any health care facility.

There are, however, several perspectives that the Christian ministry of care adds to these professional standards. Above all, care of the sick is inspired and judged by the spirit of the Gospels. The sanctity of human



life is protected for all. The ethical guidelines of the Catholic Health Association of Canada, rooted in Gospel values and Church teaching, and approved by the Bishops of Canada, give a concise standard of excellent care for the sick and dying. Gospel stewardship of health care resources and not-for-profit motivation keep us responsible to patients, to society, and to God. Our goal must always be to reach out to serve those who are suffering, not to sell a product. We are committed to care for the spiritual well-being of those whom we serve, and to respect their unique human identity.

We gladly acknowledge, as well, that many other Christian communities in Alberta share in making present the healing touch of Christ, through institutions and pastoral ministry. After almost 50 years of being focussed on Catholic health care, the Catholic Health Association of Alberta and Affiliates (CHAAA) has evolved into an ecumenical endeavour in which several Christian groups (Lutherans, United Church, Salvation Army, Mennonites, to name a few) are working hard, together with Catholics, to preserve and expand our common mission of healing ministry to the sick and dying, a mission rooted in faith.

Into the Third Millennium

As we begin the third millennium of Christianity, we, the bishops of Alberta, encourage all Christians to renew their sense of the healing ministry of Christ. Together we need to look into our hearts to understand what God is asking of us today. Unquestionably, we must be thankful for all of those, especially the religious sisters, the medical professionals, and the many unsung workers and volunteers, who have given and continue to give so generously of themselves in their care for the sick and the dying in our communities.



A word of gratitude also needs to go out to our governments, who have had the courage to support a health care system that treats all Canadians equally. We pray that this communal compassion will not be eroded by a lack of concern for the poor under the guise of economics.

As the question of private hospitals is raised in Alberta, there is a great need to examine the possible benefits and dangers of such a development from the perspective of our Gospel values. Will Albertans be served equally? Is this an improvement in our health system or an incursion that threatens universal access to care? If there is public money for profits in health care, how could that possibly make our system more efficient? How are public accountability and transparency served by privatization? What evidence is there that "market forces" work for the benefit of the sick in health care? Finally, are we Christians prepared to suggest alternatives that offer a better path for good, egalitarian health care?

Christians need to recognize that God's call to faith in Jesus Christ is also a call to continue his healing ministry. Healing is multifaceted. By living our faith in a loving, caring God, we bring healing hope to

others. By not sinning and by choosing to be forgiving and compassionate, we make healing a part of our daily lives. In our own homes, parishes, and communities we can bring Jesus' healing touch to the sick, to the outcast, and to the dying. In our programs and institutions, we can bring comfort and compassion in countless ways to those in need.

In Baptism we become members of the Body of Christ. As he reached out and touched the sick and the outcast, as he brought them back into the human family, as he gave all of us the hope of forgiveness and eternal life with God, so are we challenged to be his Body in this ministry today. May the Spirit of Jesus infuse us all with hearts of compassion, hands of gentleness, eyes that see, and ears that hear the cry of those who are suffering, and with the grace of knowing that we are not alone when we reach out to and care for the sick, the dying, the vulnerable, and the frail. May we be the willing instruments of Jesus' healing touch in our world.

Thomas Collins
Archbishop of Edmonton

Frederick Henry
Bishop of Calgary

Lawrence Huculak, osbm
Bishop of the Eparchy of Edmonton

Denis Croteau, omi
Bishop of Mackenzie-Fort Smith

Arthé, Guimond
Administrator of Grouard-McLennan

Walter Laliberty
Administrator of St. Paul

February 15, 2000

Catholic Health Facilities in Alberta

Banff

- Mineral Springs Hospital

Bonnyville

- Bonnyville Health Centre

Camrose

- St. Mary's Hospital

Calgary

- Father Lacombe Nursing Home

Castor

- Our Lady of the Rosary Hospital

Edmonton

- St. Michael's Extended Care Centre
- St. Joseph's Auxiliary Hospital
- **Caritas Health Group:**
 - Edmonton General
 - Grey Nuns Community Health Centre
 - Misericordia Community Health Centre

Killam

- Killam General Hospital

Lethbridge

- St. Michael's Health Centre

Mundare

- Mary Immaculate Hospital

St. Albert

- Youville Home

Trochu

- St. Mary's Health Care Centre

Vegreville

- St. Joseph's General Hospital

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