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The Healing Power of the Sacraments

Dr. Bob Schuchts

Welcome back everybody. This is week two of the Pray More Healing Retreat. I'm Bob Schuchts. Last week we talked about Jesus, our Divine Physician, and I want to start with a quote from the Catechism today about Jesus as the Divine Physician as a lead-in to what we're going to be talking about this week, which is how He heals us through the sacraments. This is 1509: ***"Heal the sick!" The Church has received this charge from the Lord and strives to carry it. And going down a little further, She believes in the life-giving presence of Christ, the physician of souls and bodies. And here's the key point for this week: This presence is particularly active through the sacraments, and in an altogether special way through the Eucharist, the bread that gives eternal life and that St. Paul suggests is connected with bodily health.***

So Jesus, our Divine Physician, heals us in many different ways, as we talked about last week. But one of the primary ways that He brings healing is through the sacraments. And I really, as much as I was brought up in the church and went to experience the sacraments my whole life, I really didn't have an appreciation for the sacraments being a real encounter with the divine presence of Jesus as our physician. I just... It wasn't part of my concept of entering into receiving the sacraments. And so it was only in my thirties that I began to become aware of that.

And just to give you a little background: I was brought up in a Catholic family, and we were pretty strong in our faith, practiced regularly, my parents were involved and even teaching CCD, and involved in some renewal movements. But then things began to become very difficult between my mother and father and my father's alcoholism, and he also became unfaithful to my mother. And when I was thirteen years old, their marriage just broke apart. And I could say that, that day that I heard my parents were going to get divorced was maybe one of the most painful days of my life. It was actually devastating. And I love my dad, I love my mom, but I didn't see my dad for two more years. And my brother, Dave, who was two years older than me, at that point didn't move with us when we moved from Pittsburg to Miami, and he stayed in Pittsburg and was soon addicted to heavy drugs and became a heroin addict by the age of sixteen. He was just a couple of years older than me. And so I basically lost my dad and my brother at the same time.

But at that point, not having any idea how to encounter Jesus in those areas of my life, I just kind of went on with life and did what many people in our world do: We

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just focus on what's ahead of us. And I became just focused on my schoolwork, I became a good student, I became a good athlete, went to college, got married, had children, entered my profession as a marriage and family therapist and teacher. And I thought life was great, until I had my first panic attack, and all of this pain that I had been burying, that had been sitting inside of me, just came to the surface. And you would think that that would be a good moment to turn back to Jesus, and in some sense I hadn't left Him, but I didn't know how to encounter Him as my Divine Physician.

And so instead I went to therapy, which was also an act of humility, because I had been a therapist for many years, and helping other people, but didn't realize that I was the one that needed the help. And so, after therapy, I began to open in a deeper way the areas of my heart where I was hurting. But still, this disconnect between what I had gone through and how to encounter Jesus there, and particularly how to encounter Him in the sacraments.

And it wasn't until a couple of years later I had an experience on a Christ Renews His Parish weekend, and I had really been struggling in my marriage, and struggling all day emotionally, mentally, spiritually. I just felt a thousand miles away from God. And a young teenager got up and gave testimony about his faith in Jesus in the Eucharist. And as he gave testimony, in his innocence and purity of heart, it was as though the Holy Spirit turned on a light switch within my own spirit, and I went from death to life. I just... from a lack a lack of belief to belief.

Just before that, I had gone to confession for the first time in about twenty years, and I'm certain that that was the open door. But I didn't realize it in the confession, I realized it as he was giving testimony of the Eucharist. And as I received Eucharist, I could experience Jesus' presence. And though I wouldn't have put it in those terms at the time, the healing had begun. That night, a group of friends and I began to pray together, began to praise God, and I had a really powerful encounter with the love of the Father through the Holy Spirit. And the only way I can describe it is as though rivers of living water flowing up from your belly, you know, that explosion of grace and love that I felt. And my relationship with God the Father, that I didn't know was broken, was healed. I just knew His love, and I was able to go home and love my wife and love my children in a new way.

But what was really interesting is that, right after that, my brother, Dave, who had been in jail for selling drugs, came and lived with my wife and I and our children. And when he came to live with us, he was still... he was free from drugs, but he was still pretty hardcore. But over the six months of living with us, he began to see the changes in me and began to see the changes in my brother, who was also a part of that weekend, and also a brother-in-law of mine, and he decided that he wanted

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to go on this weekend a couple of years... maybe a year after I had gone. And I was just shocked. Here's my brother, who had been hardcore into drugs and to jail twice, not just once but twice, had seemed to have turned his back on God, and now he was open and desiring.

So, as he tells the story, he went through the first day of the weekend and felt like he didn't belong there. That nobody's life had been like his had been. And when it came to the time of going to confession, he really wrestled. He didn't want to go. Like many of us, we resist the very thing that's going to heal us. And when he then went to the sacrament of reconciliation, he was able to confess with Father Mike - our pastor both then and now, thirty some years later - he was able to confess everything that he had done. And as he described it, he felt this kind of euphoria, this lifting of the self-hatred he had been carrying, and the guilt, and the shame. But then he went back. That night, when he went to bed, the enemy began to torment him. And as he tormented him, he began to show him just how much damage he had done by all the things that he had just confessed.

And he it was about three o'clock in the morning, he couldn't sleep. He got up, went to the sanctuary of the church and knelt before an image of the resurrected Jesus, and the tabernacle, and the altar. And he said "Jesus, how can You forgive me?" He says "How can You forgive me through that priest? How do I know You forgave me?" And he just heard in the silence of his heart, "Has your family forgiven you?" And he had to understand and accept "Yeah, yeah, my family's forgiven me." And the Holy Spirit spoke, "Where do you think they got that forgiveness from? Did they do it on their own merit, or was it from Me?" And he had to acknowledge "Yeah, it was from You." And He says "Even more so, I have given the priesthood My authority to forgive sins. When Father Mike pronounced those words of forgiveness and absolution, your sins were forgiven; they were washed away."

At that point my brother, who hadn't cried in I'm sure 20 years, just began to weep. All the self-hatred, all the self-loathing, all the pain of all those years just came pouring out. He says when he went to communion the next day he just had this joy, this sense of the Prodigal being brought back into the embrace of the father, and the robes of salvation being put onto him, and just being restored to love, being restored to the household. And, like the older brother who had been standing in judgment of my brother - even though I was the younger brother - in the Prodigal Son story, I didn't realize that there were places where I was still judging my brother until I saw him, until I saw him walk out of that church and his face was radiant. And I just embraced him, and we began to cry together, and I had my brother back, and he had his relationship with God back.

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Now, if that were the end of the story that would have been good enough, but we ended up having a couple of really good years. But he found out not long after that that he had contracted HIV through a heroin needle before he went to prison, and a couple of years later he began to have symptoms of AIDS. And I tell this whole story *Be Healed*, but just to condense this story for the sake of our time right now: he ended up contracting AIDS, having AIDS, and going through a process of dying. And in the middle of that, I had a dream one night. We were praying for his physical healing, and I had a dream one night, and I sensed the Lord say “Dave is not going to be healed physically, but he’s being healed physically, and your entire family is being healed emotionally and physically.”

And, sure enough, over the months of his decline, I saw such amazing things happening in the family, of the healing that had... of the brokenness that had happened before. Now, this had been going on for a little while, but Dave’s death seemed to bring it to an accelerated level. And one of the beautiful events was, two weeks before he actually died, I didn’t know that he was close to death, but my sister Margaret and I drove over to be with him. And I was so sad when I got there, because I saw him and he was in a comatose state, and I realized I wasn’t going to have a chance to say goodbye, and none of us would.

And so we decided to call a priest, a local priest, to come and anoint him with the sacrament of anointing and the last rites. And so this priest came, who I didn’t know, but he came and anointed him. And there were no fireworks, there was nothing spectacular that happened in the anointing, but we were reassured that Dave was receiving a final blessing before his death, or so we thought. And Wayne, Margaret and I went out to run, and as we went out to our run we were planning his funeral.

And on the way back to the house, Wayne had a big picture window in the back of his house next to Dave’s bedroom, and we see Dave sitting up on the bed and trying to stand, totally awake and totally alive. And we were just dumbfounded. I mean, the joy of... it was literally like a resurrection. Like he had been raised from the dead. And just... we couldn’t wait. We, first of all, we didn’t want him to stand up because we didn’t know if he could walk, but, second of all, we couldn’t wait to get in there to hug him. It was like we had... we had our brother, and it was, like, amazing.

I had never before that moment seen the power of the sacrament of anointing of the sick. I had been present with it before. But in that moment I saw that it was also not just for preparing for death, but for bringing to life and healing. And why God only healed him for two weeks, and the healing wasn’t complete, but He brought him out of the coma, and it was only afterwards that I understood why. We had the

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absolute best time of our life that weekend. We gave Dave a bath, we were like little kids, and when Dave hugged me, saying goodbye at the end of that weekend, he held on to my neck and he says “This is the best weekend ever of our life.”

That would be the last time that I could see him conscious, but he ended up being able to say goodbye to every one of our family members. And what I talk about in *Be Healed*, and I don't want to go into depth right now, is my dad ended up coming down and being with him as he died, and my wife Margie and I were there. And it was just a glorious last day as he was able to say goodbye to his daughter, to all of his family members, and all of us were able to say goodbye. And why would Jesus do that? Because He loves us, and He loved Dave, and He accomplished so much healing even in those last two weeks through the sacrament.

Each one of the sacraments is a healing and, as Pope Benedict has said, it's not just a healing for us individually, but it's a healing for us corporately. If we go back to what we talked about last time, the brokenness happened at The Fall with sin, and the sacraments are God's remedy to bring things back together. Every single one of the sacraments is an encounter with Jesus, and every time we encounter Jesus we encounter His love, we encounter His truth, we encounter His healing. And each time we have an encounter, even if it's not dramatic in the way that Dave got up out of that bed, or came out after the forgiveness; every time we go to confession, every time we receive the Eucharist, every time we receive any of the sacraments, Jesus is present, loving us, healing us, restoring us. And as Pope Benedict XVI said, it's not just our own individual healing, it's our corporate healing, like what happened with Dave.

The Eucharist is capable, because it's an encounter with Jesus fully and presently, it's capable of healing us in every degree: Personally, emotionally, physically, spiritually, and relationally. And one of the sad things that I see taking place is that we don't come with that anticipation. We're too much too often like the church of Nazareth, that comes without an expectation. You know, this is too familiar to us. And yet down through history there have been so many miraculous healings as people received the Eucharist, and even today. In *Be Healed* and in *Be Transformed*, my book on the healing power of the sacraments, I talk about some of the miracles that have happened through the sacraments that are demonstrations of Jesus' encounter with us. It begins with baptism, and I want to end with a prayer experience here, so that you can experience some of the healing power of your own baptism.

If you remember the scene where Jesus is in the Jordan in the scriptures, and John the Baptist is baptizing Him. Well, I want to invite you to be a spectator there. And then, if you're willing, an active participate, as a way of reliving the graces and

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healing of your own baptism. So, as Jesus is there in the Jordan, and you're over on the banks of the Jordan, just in the quiet of your own imagination, however you would picture this or imagine this, imagine Jesus signaling for you to come over and be with Him in the water. That He's personally chosen you to be baptized with Him.

And so, as He does that, pay attention to what happens inside of you. Any place of unworthiness, any place of fear, any place of shame. Just make note of that. As He calls you over, if you go, He gives you an opportunity to acknowledge that to Him just privately, and then He assures you that He loves you and that He's called you to be one with Him. So He puts His arm around you, and as you're there in the water He asks you if you're willing to be baptized, if you're willing to have all of that washed away.

And as you go down underneath the water with Him, Jesus is holding you. You're under the water dying with Christ, and as you come up out of the water it's a picture of resurrection. And in that resurrection, you notice Jesus is not there anymore, and you're wondering "Where did He go?" And He speaks to you from the inside, "I'm right here, inside of you. We've become one. I am in you, you are in Me." That's the miracle of baptism.

But as Jesus then was in prayer, and He looked up into the heavens, you're joined with Him. And so it's you praying with Jesus, hearing the voice of the Father speak to you very personally. This is what happened at the day of your baptism. "You are My beloved. In you I delight. In you I am well pleased." Those words are not just for Jesus but, joined with Jesus, those words were for you. In the Psalms we say the Lord delights in His people. The Lord delights in you personally. You became His at baptism. He created you, and sin separates you, but in baptism you're brought back into that wholeness. And every Eucharist is a reinforcement of the belovedness of Jesus with you.

So I want you, as we end here today, I want you to think of your own baptism and the permanent seal that that is in your life, that there's a healing in that baptism. That you are no longer an orphan, as St. Paul says. You are no longer separated from God, on your own, having to take care of yourself. But you are a beloved son or a beloved daughter of the Father, and that's your deepest and truest identity. And every sacramental celebration - whether it's the Eucharist, or your confession, or marriage - is a participation and an entering in of that reality.

You're a beloved son, you're a beloved daughter. I just invite you over this next time in-between retreats, if you would allow yourself, to meditate and pray with that, and ask Jesus to heal all the places in your heart where you don't believe that you're beloved, where you don't know that you're chosen, where you don't know

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that you're wanted. And as you pray with that, just trust that He desires to communicate that deeply in your heart. God bless you, and until next time.