

Christ

the Physician of our Souls and Bodies

November Catechetical Reflection



CATECHETICAL YEAR 2021-22
EASTERN CATHOLIC CHURCHES OF AMERICA

Approach the Lord, Boldly with Faith

In November, we will hear one Gospel reading where Jesus performs two healing miracles: the Raising of Jairus' Daughter and the Healing of the Hemorrhaging Woman. In each story, death is performing its violence against God's creation. Death drains breath and life away. Death separates the soul from the body. Death drains blood (the source of life) from the body. But, in each story, those suffering from the sting of "death" seek Him. Jairus and the hemorrhaging woman both believe that Jesus gives life and conquers death. Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue, has a young daughter, an only daughter, who is dying. Her breath, her life, drains away before she can mature, flourish and be fruitful. The hemorrhaging woman has bled for twelve years. She spent all her money seeking a cure. Her source of life, her blood, drains from her, unnaturally and unwillingly. Jesus is their last and only hope. Jairus and the woman believe that the Lord alone can intervene in their desperate state. Jesus alone has the power to restore life to the dead and dying. They humble themselves and move toward the Lord. They seek Him boldly with faith. He is the Physician of Our Souls and Bodies.

In the Gospel of Luke, these healing miracles immediately follow last month's healing miracle: Jesus' healing of the Gerasene Demoniac. Jesus performed that healing in a land of uncleanness. Metaphorically, the land of the Gerasenes is on the edge of the Kingdom of God. Now, St. Luke tells us, Jesus returns to Galilee, and a crowd of people welcome Him. They are waiting for Him. It's not clear how patiently they wait, or for how long, but they wait for the Lord nonetheless.

A Young Girl Dies, Jesus Raises Her Up

We hear that Jesus brings back to life the dead daughter of Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue. His position is one of the highest places of honor in Jairus' local community. Tragedy strikes his life anyway. Education, wealth and honors do not shield his household from suffering the violence of death, the separation of the soul from the body. He has an only daughter. She is dying. She is only twelve years old. At her age, in ancient Galilee, she is on the edge of marriage and childbearing. Jairus' hopes for his only daughter, and the fruitfulness of her potential marriage, are nearly crushed as her life drains away. His situation is so desperate that he humbles himself. Jairus lays aside the dignity of his high position and seeks Christ's help. St. Luke tells us that Jairus "implored" Jesus, or "begged" Him, to come to his house and heal his daughter. Jairus "falls" down at Jesus' feet. St. Matthew uses the word "worshipped" as Jairus "prostrated" himself before Christ, kissing the ground with his head and bowing down like a dog before his Master. Jairus believes that Jesus can heal his dying daughter. And being God, clothed in our human nature, Jesus does. First, Jairus recognizes his desperate state. He humbles himself and seeks the Lord. Jesus enters Jairus' home, into an inner room, takes his dead daughter by the hand, and raises her up. Jesus reveals His power over death by His healing hand.

Jesus Heals the Woman's Inner Wound

We believe in Jesus as Lord and Messiah. We sing of His power over life and death every Sunday and every Pascha. But, His power exists even in the hem of His garment! The following story is sandwiched in the midst of the healing of Jairus' daughter. A hemorrhaging woman, St. Veronica, according to tradition, is healed through her deep faith. She says to herself "if only I can touch His garment, I will be made whole." If Christ can heal her, her source of life, her blood, will stop draining away from her; her bleeding will stop. With faith, in humiliation, she boldly seeks the Lord. She seeks to touch Him, knowing that He is her last and only hope for healing.

Frequent bleeding would have made full inclusion in Jewish society difficult (cf. Leviticus 15). Her bleeding made her "unclean" according to the Law of Moses. If someone touched her or something she sat on, that person would become ritually unclean also. So, we may presume, for many years, St. Veronica was physically alone and untouchable, emotionally isolated and prevented from communal worship of God. Her suffering is intense: physical, emotional, social and spiritual. Disease does not affect the body alone, but the whole person. Regardless, she has faith that Jesus has the power to heal her disease. She touches the hem of His garment, and she is healed. Her whole person is made whole. Through touch, the untouchable is healed from disease. Through the hem of Christ's garment, her blood stops draining away.

Spiritual Death and the Inner Wound of Sin

Both Jairus and the hemorrhaging woman approach Christ boldly. Both humble themselves before the Lord. Both seek Him with faith. Both trust that God alone can intervene in their desperate state. And so, Jairus reaches out to Christ and brings Him into his home; St. Veronica reaches out to the hem of Christ's garment to receive His grace and healing. The woman was bleeding and her life was draining away. Jairus's daughter was sick, and dying. When she died, her breath drained away. Christ alone has the power to heal our wounded nature. Christ alone can restore life when it has drained away.

We wait for Christ today, just as the crowds waited for Him. We suffer today, just as Jairus and St. Veronica did. Spiritually speaking, sinful thoughts and secret sins drain our inner life in Christ. We "bleed" from the inside. Good deeds are the fruit of good faith. Good deeds are our metaphorical "children." In sin, our "daughter" lay sick and dying. In sin, our life drains away toward spiritual death. Sin is not merely "breaking the moral law." Sin is to fail to reflect clearly the image and likeness of God. Sin is to fail to be the holy saints we are created to be. Sin is to "miss the mark," or the target, of life in Christ. Sin affects the whole person. Sin separates us from God and one another. The frequent bleeding of St. Veronica separated her from the people of God, and sin separates us from God and neighbor. Sin causes profound suffering. So, we wait for the Lord. But, God does not make us wait forever in our sin and suffering.

Grace Runs to the Hem of Christ's Garment

Christ, the Physician of Our Souls and Bodies, has come to heal our diseases. God dwells among us, first, clothed in human flesh, now, in the midst of the Church. Jesus continues to heal us through the ministry of the priests of the Church. When the priest vests himself before the Divine Liturgy, he places a garment over his head, called an "epitrachelion." The epitrachelion is a long strip of fabric that extends from the back of the priest's neck, down to the hem of his garment, in the front. As he places it over his head, he prays: "Blessed is God who pours out grace upon His priests: as oil upon the head,

which ran down unto the beard, the beard of Aaron, even to the hem of his garment, at all times, now and always and forever and ever. Amen." The prayer symbolizes the grace of God, the Holy Spirit, pouring down upon the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ, through His bishops and priests. Grace pours down, even to the "hem of His garment." The hem is symbolically the "fragmented edge" of the Church, where the repentant sinner waits to be reunited to the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church. The hemorrhaging woman touches the hem of Christ's garment, and her inner bleeding, her wound that causes suffering, is healed. The repentant sinner, too, touches the hem of Christ's garment, and his inner wound, his spiritual suffering, is healed. Jairus invites Jesus into his home (into the inner room of his dead daughter), and Jesus raises her up. The repentant sinner, too, invites Christ into the inner room of his heart and mind that He may raise up the soul, deadened by sin. The repentant sinner is healed first by humbling himself, then by seeking the Lord, and approaching Christ boldly with faith.

In the Mystery of Penance, the Sinner is Healed

Through the Mysteries, the Sacraments, the Holy Spirit pours out grace upon us. Grace runs down to the "hem of the garment" of the Body of Christ, to the "edge" of the Church, where order fragments into chaos, holiness into sin, life into death. From Christ the Head, through the bishops and priests, grace runs down the epitrachelion to the "hem of the garment." The repentant sinner is made whole by the "hem of the garment" of the priest in the Mystery of Penance. In the Mystery of Penance, after the sinner confesses his sins, the priest lays his epitrachelion, the "hem of his garment," over the sinner's bowed head. Forgiveness is proclaimed. And then, the sinner is reunited fully to the Body of Christ, the Church. The sinner is made clean. He was dead in sin and now rises alive in Christ. His life was draining, his soul was dying, and now, he is healed. He is reunited with God. Like Jairus and the hemorrhaging woman, the repentant sinner in Penance approaches Christ boldly with faith when he lays bare his inner life. He humbles himself and seeks the grace of God. He knows that Christ alone can heal the inner wound of sin and the death of his soul. Christ alone can end his suffering and make him whole, both body and soul. And so, we too, in the Mystery of Penance, humble ourselves, seek Christ, approach Him with faith, and say to ourselves, "If only I can touch the hem of His garment, I will be healed."