

Healing for Mental Illness Thirteenth Week in Ordinary Time Wednesday, July 5, 2017
8:15 AM Gn 21:5, 8-20a; **Mt 8:28-34** (St. Anthony Zaccaria; St. Elizabeth of Portugal) (We can pray for people who are mentally ill, as we pray for people who are physically ill.)

“And when they saw him they begged him to leave their district.”

Commentators will say that in the ancient world mental illness was always regarded as the presence of some sort of demon or spirit that caused the mind of the person to go awry. This may be true. But it would be a very big mistake to imagine that that’s the only kind of spiritual problem, that when we refer to demons or spirits we are only talking about mental illness—not necessarily.

In this case what is described has nothing to do with mental illness, and it’s told quite explicitly in order to show that **there is some sort of energy at work that is, first of all, adverse to Jesus, hostile to Jesus, and yet really real, capable of actually possessing people and pigs.** And that’s the point. This is what actually we call **demonic possession. It has actually nothing in common with mental illness.** The problem is **people who have mental illness imagine this is what’s wrong with them.** So the assumptions of the past become a problem in the present, because mentally ill people who are schizophrenic, who hear voices, imagine they need an exorcism, when in fact **they do not need an exorcism at all. If anything they need some kind of medication.** But they will push away the medication and demand exorcism. This actually happens way too frequently. Part of the reason is that medication is not very pleasant, and people actually feel better without it.

But we cannot exorcise mental illness. We can pray for people who are mentally ill, as we pray for people who are physically ill. And it is possible that they receive healings, but not from the prayer of exorcism, not from the process of exorcism. It’s the wrong process. So we

have to be clear about this, especially as we try to deal with and make acceptable the whole issue of mental illness. We have to see mental illness as not a moral flaw. Mental illness is not something just in people's heads. It is an illness, a disease. And at the present time we don't actually have too many really good ways of dealing with it. So here is one of the great tasks we have. **As people of God we have to bring healing, not only to people who are racked with cancer and stroke and various physical ailments, but also with mental ailments,** because those ailments are in the brain, in the nervous system of the human makeup. And it is probably within our ability to do something good with it and to bring some sort of great relief to people who suffer. I believe that is general thrust of the gospel.