

# Sickness In Families

## A Catholic Guide To Family Happiness

Edited By Francis X. J. W.

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THE man Job must surely be counted among those who enjoyed a happy family life. The Bible calls him "greatest among all the peoples of the East." He had seven sons and three daughters, ten children in all. He also had the means to provide well for his family. Most important, he took the lead in spiritual activities and was concerned about his children's standing before the Lord God our Father. All of this resulted in close and happy family ties. – See Job 1:1-5 for all the details.

Job's situation did not escape the attention of Satan, The Lord God our Father's archenemy. Satan, who is constantly looking for ways to break the integrity of God's servants, attacked Job by destroying his happy family. Then, he "struck Job with a very grievous ulcer, from the sole of the foot even to the top of his head." Thus Satan hoped to use tragedy and sickness to break Job's integrity. - Job 2:6-7 has the full details.

Review Question: How did Satan use tragedy and sickness to try to break Job's integrity?

The Bible does not give the medical designation of Job's affliction. It does, though, tell us the symptoms. His flesh was covered with maggots, and his skin formed crusts and rotted away. Job's breath was loathsome, and his body was foul smelling. He was racked with pain. (Job 7:5; 19:17; 30:17, & 30:30 contain the gruesome imagery.) In agony Job sat among the ashes and scraped himself with a piece of broken earthenware. (Job 2:8) Truly a pitiable sight!

Review Question: What were the symptoms of Job's illness?

How would you react if you were afflicted with such a serious disease? Today, Satan still does, at times, strike God's servants with sickness as he did Job. Moreover, in view of human imperfection, the stresses of daily life, and the deteriorating environment we live in, it is only to be expected that from time to time, family members will get sick. Despite the preventive measures that we might take, all of us are susceptible to illness, although few will suffer to the extent that Job did. When sickness invades our household, it can truly be a challenge. Let us therefore see how the teaching of the Church, drawn from the revelation in the Bible, helps us to cope with this ever-present enemy of mankind.

- 2 Timothy 3:16 proclaims: "All scripture, inspired of God, is profitable to teach, to reprove, to correct, and to instruct in justice." We are addressing one of the deepest problems to face mankind – the problem of the existence of evil. This problem vexes not only ourselves but it has vexed the greatest thinkers throughout history. The Preacher in Ecclesiastes 9: 11 observed: "I turned me to another thing, and I saw that under the sun, the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the learned, nor favour

to the skillful: but time and chance in all.” Only the coming of the fullness of God’s revelation in Christ would make sense of it all. Otherwise, it was, as the same Preacher consistently observed: “All is vanity!”

In this Chapter we won’t be doing a deep theological inquiry into the problem of the existence of evil and sickness. Rather our task will be the much more pragmatic and practical one of helping families to cope with sickness in a spiritually rewarding, yet practical way.

Review Question: What experience does every family have from time to time?

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT IT?

WHEN A FAMILY MEMBER IS SICK

Disruption of the normal routine of life, no matter what the cause, is always difficult, and this is especially true if the disruption is caused by prolonged sickness. Even a short-term illness calls for adjustments, concessions, and sacrifices. Healthy family members may have to keep quiet to allow the sick one to get rest. They may have to forgo certain activities. Still, in most families even young children feel compassion for a sick sibling or parent, although they may occasionally have to be reminded to be thoughtful. (Read them Colossians 3:12 to remind them of the Christian ideal) In the case of temporary sickness, the family is usually ready to do what is needed. Besides, each family member would hope for similar consideration if he or she were to get sick.

- Matthew 7:12 is the “Golden Rule”. Why not read it again now?

Review Question: How do family members usually react in cases of temporary sickness?

FAMILY HAPPINESS

What, though, if the illness is very serious and the disruptions are drastic and prolonged?

For example, what if someone in the family is paralyzed by a stroke, disabled by Alzheimer's disease, or debilitated by some other illness? Or what if a member of the family is afflicted with a mental illness, such as schizophrenia? A common initial reaction is pity - sadness that a loved one is suffering so much. However, pity may be followed by other reactions. As family members find themselves very much affected and their freedoms limited by the sickness of one person, they may come to feel resentment. They may wonder: "Why does this have to happen to me?"

Review Question: What reactions are sometimes seen if a family member is struck with a serious, lasting sickness?

Something similar seems to have gone through the mind of Job's wife. Remember, she had already experienced the loss of her children. As those tragic events unfolded, she no doubt felt progressively more distraught. Finally, as she saw her once active and vigorous husband afflicted with a painful, loathsome disease, she appears to have lost sight of the vital factor that overshadowed all the tragedies - the relationship that she and her husband had with God. The Bible says: "Finally Job's wife said to him: Do you still continue in your simplicity, integrity and blamelessness? Curse God and die." - Job 2:9. [Some of the ancient Jewish commentators understood her to commit the sin of despair and took her to instruct Job to “bless God, and then die”.]

Review Question: How did Job's wife react to his sickness, and what did she evidently forget?

Many feel frustrated, even angry, when their life is radically changed by someone else's sickness. Still, a Christian who reasons on the situation should realize eventually that this affords him an opportunity to demonstrate the genuineness of his love. True love, charity or agape "is patient and long-suffering, is kind: It... seeks not her own [interests]. It... bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (This is from 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. Why not do a meditation on the whole passage?) Rather than allow negative feelings to dominate, therefore, it is essential that we do our best to get them under control. - Proverbs 3:21 reminds us: "My son, let not these things depart from your eyes: keep the law with sound judgment and hold to counsel and prudence".

Review Question: When a family member is very sick, what scripture will help other family members to keep a proper viewpoint?

#### WHEN A FAMILY MEMBER IS SICK

What can be done to safeguard the spiritual and emotional welfare of a family when one of its members is seriously ill? Of course, each illness calls for its own particular care and treatment, and it would not be proper in this publication to recommend any medical or home-care procedures. Nonetheless, in a spiritual sense, God our Father is a caring and compassionate God. Psalm 145:14 [Psalm 144:14 in the Vulgate] reminds us: "The Lord lifts up all that fall: and sets up all that are cast down." King David wrote: "Blessed [and happy] is he [anyone] that understands concerning [cares for] the needy [the weak] and the poor: the Lord will deliver him in the evil day [the day of calamity]. The Lord [will] preserve him and give him life, and make him blessed upon the earth: and deliver him not up to the will of his enemies. The Lord [will] help him on his bed of sorrow: You have made his divan [his couch] in his sickness." (Psalm 41: 1-3) [Psalm 40:2-4 in the Vulgate.] God our Father preserves his servants alive spiritually, even when they are tried emotionally beyond their own limits. (2 Corinthians 4:7 says: "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence may be of the power of God, and not of us.") Many family members facing serious sickness in their household have echoed the words of the Psalmist: "I have been humbled [and afflicted], O Lord, exceedingly: May You quicken me [revive me] according to Your word." - Psalm 119:107 [Psalm 118:107 in the Vulgate].

Review Question: What assurances can help a family spiritually and emotionally when a member is seriously ill?

#### HANDY HINT

Christians show the depth of their love when their partners fall sick

#### A HEALING SPIRIT

#### FAMILY HAPPINESS

Says a Bible proverb, "The spirit of a man upholds [can endure] his infirmity: but a spirit that is easily angered [or easily broken], who can bear this?" (Proverbs 18:14) Trauma can afflict the spirit of a family as well as "the spirit of a man."

Yet, "Soundness of heart [a tranquil heart] is the life of the flesh: but envy is the rottenness of the bones." (Proverbs 14:30) Whether a family successfully copes with serious illness or not depends to a large extent on the attitude, or spirit, of its members.

- Compare Proverbs 17:22 which says: "A joyful mind [heart] makes age flourishing: a sorrowful spirit dries up the bones."

One Catholic woman had to endure seeing her husband impaired by a stroke only six years after they were married. "My husband's speech was badly affected, and it became almost impossible to converse with him," she recalled. "The mental strain of trying to understand what he was struggling to say was very great." Imagine, too, the agony and frustration that the husband must have experienced. What did the couple do? Even though they lived a long way from the Church, this good bride did her best to stay spiritually strong calling on the priest to visit often. He brought them both Holy Communion regularly. At regular intervals he received the Sacrament of the Sick. This brought them both much consolation. She maintained her practice of regular reception of the Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation. She maintained a spirit of prayer in the house by the daily recitation of the Holy Rosary and other 'family prayers'. Often she would read parts of the Scriptures to her husband, especially those parts used in the Sunday or daily Masses. She also subscribed to a number of good Catholic magazines and her diocesan newspaper. This enabled her to keep up-to-date with all the latest information on the Church as well as with a continual supply of supplementary spiritual food.

This all gave her the spiritual strength to care for her dear husband until his death some five years later.

Review Questions:

- (a) What is vital if a family is to cope successfully with sickness?
- (b) How did one woman cope with the sickness of her husband?

#### WHEN A FAMILY MEMBER IS SICK

In Job's case it was he, the one afflicted, who remained strong. "Job said to her (his wife): 'You have spoken like one of the foolish women: if we have received good things at the hand of God, why should we not receive evil?' In all these things Job did not sin with his lips." (Job 2:10) No wonder the disciple Saint James later cited Job as an outstanding example of patience and forbearance! At James 5:11 we read: "Behold, we account them blessed who have endured. You have heard of the patience [endurance] of Job, and you have seen the end [purpose] of the Lord, that the Lord is merciful and compassionate." Similarly today, in many cases the courageous attitude of the sick family member has helped others in the household to maintain a positive outlook. Often they see themselves as sharing, in a small way, the mystery of uniting their sufferings with that of Christ Himself.

Review Question: As seen in the case of Job, what contribution does the sick one sometimes make?

Most who have had to deal with sickness in the family agree that initially it is not unusual for family members to have a difficult time facing the facts. They also point out that the way in which one comes to view the situation is extremely important. Changes and adjustments in the household routine may be difficult at the outset. But if a person really makes the effort, he can adapt to a new situation. In doing so, it is important that we not compare our circumstances with those of others who do not have sickness in the family, thinking that their life is easier and that 'it is just not fair!' Actually, no one really knows what burdens others have to bear. All Christians find comfort in Jesus' words: "Come to me, all you that labour, and are burdened, and I will refresh you." - Matthew 11:28

Review Question: What comparison should not be made by a family experiencing serious sickness?

## SETTING PRIORITIES

### FAMILY HAPPINESS

In the face of serious sickness, a family would do well to remember the inspired words: "Designs are brought to nothing where there is no counsel: but where there are many counsellors, they are established." (Proverbs 15:22) Could family members come together and discuss the situation caused by the sickness? It would certainly be appropriate to do so prayerfully and to turn to God's Word for guidance. Psalm 25:4 [Psalm 24:4-5 in the Vulgate] reminds us: "Show, O Lord, Your ways to me, and teach me Your paths. Direct me in Your truth, and teach me; for You are God my Saviour; and on You have I waited all the day long."

What should be considered in such a discussion? Well, there are medical, financial, and family decisions to be made. Who will provide the primary care? How can the family cooperate to support that care? How will the arrangements made affect each member of the family? How will the spiritual and other needs of the primary caregiver be looked after? Is there a need to call the priest for the Sacrament of Anointing? Never delay this call. Are the spiritual needs of the sick one being met?

Review Question: How can proper priorities be set?

Praying earnestly for God our Father's direction, meditating on his Word, and courageously following the way indicated by the Bible and in the Lives of the Saints often result in blessings beyond our expectations. The disease of an ailing family member may not always go into remission. But leaning on God our Father always leads to the best outcome in any situation. Psalm 55:22 [Psalm 54:23 in the Vulgate] says: "Cast your care upon the Lord, and he shall sustain you: he shall not suffer the just to waver for ever."

The psalmist further wrote: "If I said: My foot is slipping: Your mercy, [Your loving kindness and steadfast love,] O Lord, assisted me. According to the multitude of my sorrows in my heart, Your comforts have given joy to my soul." - Psalm 94:18-19.

See also Psalm 63:6-8 [Psalm 62: 6-8 in the Vulgate] which says: "Let my soul be filled as with marrow and fatness: and my mouth shall praise You with joyful lips. If I have remembered You upon my bed, I will meditate on You in the morning: Because You have been my helper. And I will rejoice under the covert of Your wings."

Review Question: What support does God our Father provide for families experiencing serious sickness?

### HELPING THE CHILDREN

#### WHEN A FAMILY MEMBER IS SICK

Serious sickness can cause problems for children in the family. It is important that parents help the children to understand the needs that have arisen and what they may do to help. If the one who has become ill is a child, the siblings must be helped to understand that the extra attention and care the sick one is receiving does not mean that the other children are loved any less. Rather than allow resentment or rivalry to develop, parents can help the other children to form a closer bond with one another and have genuine affection as they co-operate in handling the situation caused by the sickness.

Young children will usually respond more readily if parents appeal to their feelings rather than to lengthy or complicated explanations about medical conditions. So they could be given some idea of what the sick family member is going through. If the healthy children see how the illness prevents the sick one from doing many of the things that they themselves take for granted, they are likely to have more "brotherly affection" and to be "tenderly compassionate." - 1 Peter 3:8 says: "In fine, be all you of one mind, having compassion one of another, being lovers of the brotherhood, merciful, modest, and humble."

Review Question: What points can be made when discussing with young children the sickness of a sibling?

Older children should be helped to realize that a difficult situation exists and it requires sacrifices on the part of everyone in the family. With doctors' fees and medical bills to pay, it may not be possible for parents to provide for the other children as they would like to. Will the children resent this and feel that they are being deprived? Or will they understand the situation and be willing to make the needed sacrifices? Much depends on the way the matter is discussed and the spirit that is engendered in the family. Indeed, in many families the sickness of a family member has helped in training children to follow Paul's counsel: "Let nothing be done through contention, neither by vain glory [egotism]: but in humility [lowliness], let each esteem others better than themselves: Each one not considering the things that are his own, but those that are other men's."

- Philippians 2:3-4.

Review Question: How can older children be helped to understand the problems caused by sickness, and how might this be of benefit to them?

#### HANDY HINT

When the family works together, problems can be handled

#### HOW TO VIEW MEDICAL TREATMENT

#### FAMILY HAPPINESS

God has gifted humans with the great benefits of medical knowledge. The Catholic Church has been at the forefront of the building of hospitals (from the 4th century onwards) and the establishing of religious orders of nurses and other medical professionals. Saints Cosmas and Damien, martyrs of the third century are the special patrons of the medical doctors' profession. They used to provide their services free of charge and thus won large numbers to the Catholic faith by their charity and kindness. Balanced Christians do not object to medical treatment as long as it does not go against God's law (such as using products obtained through the killing of pre-born babies). When a member of their family becomes ill, they are eager to seek help to relieve the suffering of the afflicted one. Still, there may be conflicting professional opinions that must be weighed. Additionally, in recent years new diseases and disorders have been cropping up, and for many of these, there is no generally accepted method of treatment. Even accurate diagnoses are sometimes difficult to obtain. What, then, should a Christian do?

Review Question: What responsibilities do family heads shoulder when a family member is sick?

#### WHEN A FAMILY MEMBER IS SICK

Although one Bible writer (Saint Luke) was a physician and the apostle Saint Paul offered helpful medical advice to his friend Saint Timothy, the Scriptures are a moral and spiritual guide, not a medical textbook. (Colossians 4:14 tells us of Luke's profession; He is patron saint of physicians, surgeons, students, butchers, and artists. 1 Timothy 5:23 has the famous advice of Saint Paul to Timothy to have a little wine for the sake of the bouts of stomach sickness that afflicted Timothy.) Hence, in matters of medical treatment, Christian family heads have to make their own balanced decisions. Perhaps they may feel that they need to obtain more than one professional opinion. (Compare Proverbs 18:17 which has a fine saying: "The one who first states a case seems right, until the other comes and cross-examines.") They will certainly want the best available help for their sick family member, and most seek this among regular medical doctors. Some feel more comfortable with alternative health therapies. This too is a personal decision but must be approached with great prudence and with the due respect for the knowledge God has allowed men to discover in the various fields of science and medicine.

Still, when handling health problems, Christians do not cease to remember the prayer "Your word, O Lord, is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my paths."

(Psalm 119:105) [Psalm 118: 105 in the Vulgate]

They continue to follow the guidelines set out in the Bible. They remember, however, to always trust in God. He knows what is best for us and as Isaiah 55:8-9 puts it so eloquently: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts: nor your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are exalted above the earth, so are my ways exalted above your ways, and my thoughts above your thoughts."

Thus, following the guidelines first enunciated in the Bible they shun diagnostic techniques that smack of spiritism. This is a special problem in many third world countries, where, in ignorance or dire poverty, many heedlessly resort to such practitioners, but it is to be regretted that they are also appearing among many 'New Age' movements in the West as well. Good Christians avoid treatments and procedures that violate traditional Catholic and Bible principles (Abortions and Sterilizations immediately spring to mind) and they avoid treatments that violate Bible principles.

- Psalm 36:9 [Psalm 35; 9-10 in the Vulgate] says: "They [both man and beast] shall be inebriated with the plenty of Your house, O Lord; and You shall make them drink of the torrent of Your pleasure. For with You is the fountain of life; and in Your light we shall see light"

Revelation 21:8 contains one of Our Lord's strongest warnings against sin, even if tempted during sickness. It is Jesus sitting on the Throne speaking in Saint John's vision. He says: "But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, they shall have their portion in the pool burning with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

Some have on occasion been disturbed by a certain zealous Christian sect which insists that the Bible prohibits blood transfusions. This is not so, but to support their contention this sect will quote Acts 15: 28-29 and the disciplinary decree issued by the first 'general council' of the Catholic Church. The letter issued by them said: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us, to lay no further burden upon you than these necessary things: That you abstain from things sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication; from which things keeping yourselves, you shall do well. Fare ye well." In the Apostolic age, the Church thus prohibited the

consumption of blood and the use of these other foods, though of their own nature these foods are indifferent. This was designed to bring the converted Jews more easily to admit of the society and companionship of the converted Gentiles, and also to exercise the latter in obedience. But this prohibition was but temporary, and has long since ceased to oblige; more especially in the western churches. This is a standard illustration of the Church's power of binding and loosing.

Review Question: Although not a medical text-book, in what way does the Bible provide guidance in handling sickness?

### FAMILY HAPPINESS

Consider the case of a young Indian woman named Leonie. A little while after she began to learn about the Catholic Church and the Bible as a result of studying with one of her Catholic friends, she gave birth prematurely to a baby girl who weighed only three and a quarter pounds. The woman was heartbroken when a doctor told her that the baby would be severely retarded and would never be able to walk. He advised her to surrender the baby to an institution. Her husband was uncertain about the matter. To whom could she turn?

She says: "I remember learning from the Bible in Psalm 127: 3 that 'Behold the inheritance of the Lord are children: the reward, the fruit of the womb.' (It is Psalm 126:3 in my Douay Version based on the Latin Vulgate.)" She decided to take this "inheritance" home and to care for her. Things were difficult at first, but with the help of Catholic friends in the local parish, the woman was able to manage and to provide the child with the special support needed. Twelve years later, the child was going to the Church services and Masses, had made her first Holy Communion and was now preparing to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation. She was enjoying the company of the youngsters there in the Parish and its Junior Youth Group. The mother comments: "I am so grateful that Church Teachings and Bible principles moved me to do what is right. The Bible helped me to maintain a clear conscience before the Lord God our Father and not to have regrets that would have been with me for the rest of my life. I especially am grateful that I was able to immediately identify the horrible suggestion to have my child aborted as the wicked and selfish temptation that it was. It seems to me that the 'doctor'" who made the suggestion was more interested in making some quick money rather than caring for his TWO patients, mother and child."

Review Question: How did one Indian woman reason on a Bible principle, and how did the decision she made prove right in her situation?

### WHEN A FAMILY MEMBER IS SICK just remember...

Sickness will not be with us forever. We seek not an earthy city. "For we have not here a lasting city, but we seek one that is to come," as we are reminded in Hebrews 13: 14. The prophet Isaiah pointed forward to the time when "Neither shall he that is near, say: I am feeble and sickly. The people that dwell therein, shall have their iniquity taken away from them." (Isaiah 33:24) That promise will be fulfilled in the heavenly Kingdom of God. One day Christ will return to Earth, "He will come again to judge the living and the dead. His Kingdom will have no end." \* I believe in the Resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." Until then, however, we have to live with sickness and death. Happily, God's Word and His precious Church are there to give us guidance and help. The basic rules of conduct that the Bible provides are lasting, and they transcend the ever-changing opinions of imperfect humans. In the Church we have Our Lord's own appointed custodians and guides. "He that hears you, hears me" was what Jesus told the Apostles and their successors. (Luke 10: 16) Hence, a wise person agrees with the psalmist who wrote: "The law of the



Lord is unspotted and perfect, converting souls: the testimony of the Lord is faithful, giving wisdom to little ones. The justices of the Lord are right, rejoicing hearts: the commandment of the Lord is lightsome, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is holy, enduring for ever and ever: the judgments of the Lord are true, justified in themselves. More to be desired than gold and many precious stones: and sweeter than honey and the honeycomb. For Your servant keeps them, and in keeping them there is a great reward.” - Psalm 19:7-11. [Psalm 18: 8-12 in the Vulgate]

Review Question: What comfort does the Bible give for the sick and for those who care for them?

HOW CAN THESE BIBLE PRINCIPLES HELP...

A FAMILY TO HANDLE SEVERE ILLNESS AND THE DISRUPTIONS IT CAUSES?

Love is long-suffering and endures all things. - 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.

“Charity [Love or agape] is patient, is kind: charity envies not, deals not perversely; is not puffed up; It is not ambitious, seeks not her own, is not provoked to anger, thinks no evil; It rejoices not in iniquity, but rejoices with the truth; It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

It is important to cultivate a good spirit. - Proverbs 18:14.

It is good to seek counsel before making important decisions. - Proverbs 15:22.

God our Lord and Father offers us support when life is difficult. - Psalm 55:22. [Psalm 54:23 in the Vulgate]

The Lord God our Father’s Word is a guide in all situations. - Psalm 119:105. [Psalm 118: 105 in the Vulgate]

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