

From Henry's Desk.....

Broken Spirit

"The Church is curiously a mixed body consisting of those who have never been shaken in their self-esteem or self-righteousness and who use the forms of religion for purposes of self-aggrandizement; and of the true Christians who live by a "broken spirit and a contrite heart." This citation is attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr:

Once again we are approaching the holiday season. Those of the Christian Church will be celebrating the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Most of us who are survivors of poliomyelitis have probably experienced the feeling of a broken spirit and many of us have once again experienced a broken spirit with the onset of Post Polio Syndrome and its ongoing aftermath.

Recently I have read again a polio biography entitled *The Man in the Iron Lung*. This 1956 book is about the life of Frederick Bernard Snite, Jr. Snite grew up in a family of wealth, graduated from Notre Dame University and was a committed Christian all of his life.

One of the first polio victims to receive significant publicity regarding chronic dependency on the iron lung was Fred Snite, Jr. After college at age twenty-five he joined his family on a dream trip around the world in 1936. While in Peiping (now Beijing) he came down with polio. He was admitted to the Rockefeller Memorial Hospital. This hospital was known as the John Hopkins of the Orient. His physician was a graduate of the Harvard Medical School. This hospital owned the only iron lung in China. At the time there were just over two hundred iron lungs in the world. This iron lung weighed 1200 pounds.

After fourteen months in the iron lung, Snite was successfully moved from China to Chicago by ambulance, train and ocean vessel. He never became independent of the iron lung except for several hours a day by using a portable respirator that could be strapped to his chest. In 1939 he was able to travel to Lourdes, France. The public remained interested in his story and the press followed him to Lourdes. Snite was able to bathe in the healing waters and he said, "If it's God's will that I be cured. I will be; if not, I won't. I figure I have a right to ask only one thing; the strength to face up to it."

In 1939 he married Teresa Larkin, a woman he had known before polio. They had three daughters. His medical problems took their toll and at the age of forty-three, Snite died in the iron lung in 1954 from heart and lung failure. His long time nurse felt he died after "eighteen years in that hunk of steel."

Snite's courageous story helped the fledgling National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis or March of Dimes get a jump start. Snite was fortunate to come from a wealthy family, but most polio victims did not have the advantage of wealth. Snite's life was a great inspiration to many people, especially Catholic Christians. In 1958 Snite's story was included in an elementary reader used in Catholic schools. The story was titled "The Man in the Iron Lung" and was written by Leonard C Hawkins and Milton Lomask. The story revealed Snite's life in the iron lung and his trip to Lourdes. The story carries a religious message and ends with these words:

"As the years went on, he was constantly asking himself what he could do to help others and to get closer to God himself. He never questioned God's will where his illness was concerned, but he was often plagued with the feeling that his prayers were not worthy in God's eyes. He had no intention of coasting into Heaven in an iron lung. Frederick was determined to earn his way, just as the rest of us must. 'This life is preparation for the next,' he often said. 'I have a job to do like everybody else.' "

Nineteen hundred years before Frederick Snite, the physician Luke tells the following story in the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth:

One day as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem, were sitting there. And the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick. Some men came carrying a paralytic on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus. When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven." The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . ." He said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, "We have seen remarkable things today."

During this holiday season many of us have probably experienced a broken spirit at some point in our lives. Many know the emotional pain of a broken spirit. As Frederick Snite so many of us have perhaps repressed our memories of a broken spirit and pushed on. That broken spirit may have been a small or large part of

your polio pilgrimage. In some cases after overcoming so much and adjusting to the reality of our personal worlds we have persevered and lived a nearly normal life. Now, later in life, we have once again faced a reality that could break the heartiest of spirits. Many of you in our group have and are still overcoming a broken spirit and "we have seen remarkable things today"

References

Hawkins, Leonard and Lomask, Milton; *The Man in the Iron Lung*, Double Day and Company, Inc; Garden City, New York, 1956.

Good News Bible, Today's English Version, Gospel of Luke, chapter 5, verses 17-26.