

“Inner Healing Prayer: Theological, Psychological, and Practical Concerns”  
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In recent years, there has been a resurgence in healing methods that are overly based on spiritual practices. As a Catholic psychotherapist, I felt that it was time to begin a discussion regarding these approaches and how they fit within an authentically Catholic model of psychological healing. While I recognize that there are slight variations in these approaches, I wish to comment on concerns regarding Inner Healing Prayer as a counseling theory and the ways these “prayers” are generally taught and practiced.

The reason for this series of posts is not to speak ill against anyone who incorporates these methods into their counseling practice, but rather this is a humble attempt to articulate and clarify the errors in this approach to healing, while honoring what is good. Moreover, this is not a blanket criticism against the Charismatic Renewal, since many of these approaches are born out of Charismatic spirituality. My hope is that these posts simply offer clarity and begin a much-needed discussion on their role in Catholic life today.

Let me start by saying that there are more organic ways of integrating our Faith into counseling than what is offered by Inner Healing Prayer or any other version of overly spiritualized healing methods. What is presently being offered is another iteration of the same line of thought that has been around for some time. I am not the first to speak against these approaches, nor will I be the last. In general, I discourage these practices because the risk far outweighs the reward and I have seen these approaches hurt many people.

As a former recipient of Inner Healing Prayer, and as a one who used to incorporate it into my practice, I understand the attraction. It seemingly offers a quick solution to people’s problems through simple prayers. As one who works with people’s emotions all day long, believe me, I sincerely wish that I had a quick fix to life’s problems, but there usually is not one available. As the saying goes, “If it looks too good to be true, it probably is too good to be true.” This applies to our spiritual lives as well. I will further explore this quick-fix mentality later in the posts.

However, knowing that people come to these healing events with many hurts/wounds and are looking for solutions, claiming to offer quick fixes through ‘healing prayers’ often lead to emotional manipulation and spiritual abuse. Over the years, I have wanted to use softer language regarding this practice, like “it lacks balance” or “it is off a bit,” but as I grow through my reflection and study, I am convinced that what is going on is manipulation of people’s emotions. To make matters worse, it is done in the name of the “Holy Spirit” or branded as Authentically Catholic; which is spiritual abuse, because it deeply wounds people and confuses their spirituality and relationship with Our Lord. I encourage each of you reading these posts to encounter in a fresh light the great spiritual masters of our Faith: St Benedict of Nursia, St Gregory the Great, St Ignatius of Loyola, St John of the Cross, or even modern powerhouses like St John Paul II (JPII) and Benedict XVI. In doing so with an open heart and mind you will see that this brand of “prayer” does not fit within any of those rich spiritual traditions.

Let me explain why I make these claims by examining some of the major areas of concern found in these practices: 1) presumption that all of life’s problems are rooted in some wound from the past and that true healing can only occur by unlocking that traumatic memory,

2) emotion is the single greatest gauge used to determine the work of the Holy Spirit in someone's life, 3) supposed formulization and expectation of miracles, 4) exaggerated attention drawn to demonic activity.

### 1. Presumption

While there are certainly some issues that are related to our past, we are not all traumatized in childhood. We all have issues to deal with from upbringing, but the solution is not always to fester on the past and dig for the one moment where everything went array. This is a myopic approach to healing. To pigeonhole the work of healing by only focusing on the past, runs the risk of causing someone to ruminate on their wounds and a prayer life that only looks inward. Moreover, it is a modern version of Gnosticism because it is trying to find that one secret memory that will bring about healing/salvation.

This approach to healing does not inherently lead someone outside of himself or herself, which is a central tenet of JPPII's thought. As many of you well know, JPPII often quotes from *Gaudium et Spes*, 24:3, where it says that "man... cannot fully find himself except through the sincere gift of himself." *The Program for Priestly Formation* (paragraph 80) states that human formation is a three-fold process of self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and self-gift. Nowhere does the late Holy Father or the USCCCB speak about staring at your wounds as the primary source of divine healing. Yes, we need to reflect on our past but that is different than constantly digging and hoping to find that one memory that will unlock it all. To overly focus on it is erroneous and disregards the mystery of the person and God's salvific work in their soul. I believe that the methods adopted in these types of healing prayer ministries overly focus on the first of the aforementioned three-fold process of human formation and fails to take into account the fuller picture of human growth. Yet, by confusing the fundamentalist Christian approach of "inner healing" for the fullness of truth, it leads to hurt, confusion and manipulation of the recipients of these methods. In other words, there needs to be more balance and focus on the growth of virtue and self-gift; which is where man comes to discover who he truly is and the realization of his full potential.

Furthermore, I know that these methods are branded as "just prayer," but I do not find this to be the case; rather I believe that they are psychotherapeutic interventions. To just pray for someone's healing is simply that, offering an intercessory prayer to the Lord, petitioning him, yet leaving room for his response. Benedict XVI does a far better job at articulating this type of petitionary prayer for healing during his Wednesday Address on 12/14/11 (which can be read in the book *A School of Prayer*, pgs. 132-133). Explicitly guiding someone through their personal memories crosses a line and is an intervention that requires skilled hands. We must be clear with our terms; Inner Healing Prayer is more akin to a guided meditation of memories than "just praying" for someone.

### 2. Emotionalism

As stated above, these overly spiritualized methods of healing place far too much emphasis on emotion as the single greatest criterion used to determine the presence of the Holy Spirit. In a "prayer session", when the "prayer minister" is leading the recipient through their memories often the question is "what do you feel?" and then when it is time to ask the Lord to reveal his truth, it is again emotion that is looked for to determine whether the person has fully accepted the Lord's message in their hearts. Yes, I see the value of leading people to a cathartic moment, which can be very powerful in someone's life in helping them reconcile their past. I practice marriage counseling from an Emotionally Focused perspective, too. However, I once

again raise caution on making on-the-fly assertions of the work of the Holy Spirit. Time ultimately will tell if what occurred produced genuine fruit from the Lord. Humility is in order here, not presumption.

Furthermore, what tends to occur in these “prayer sessions” is that a direct correlation is made between crying and Holy Spirit’s presence. Cardinal Suenens, who wrote much about the need for balance in the Charismatic Renewal, calls this phenomenon of excess emotionality the fabrication of an artificial spirituality (*Nature and Grace*, pgs. 2-3). In other words, over spiritualization of healing that is primarily governed by emotion is not the work of the Holy Spirit, but some artificial experience. This is a major problem. Often people walk away from the ‘healing prayer experience’ thinking that it was God and that they are fully healed, yet they may not have been. This disrupts the inner sensors and sensibilities of one’s soul to properly discern God’s presence. Precisely for this reason, St John of the Cross in the *Ascent of Mt Carmel*, cautions one seeking these types of visions and signs in prayer; because the devil can deceive us with visions, too; God rarely grants them; and when we do receive a vision or sign, we are prone to misinterpreting them or cling to them instead of God himself (Book Second, Ch. 18). God’s ways are not our ways and to make quick assertions of God’s will is often a foolish enterprise.

Along these lines, another problem arises when there are teams of prayer ministers that are not sufficiently trained in authentic Catholic spirituality, theology, or sound counseling techniques leading ‘prayer sessions’ at conferences. What then occurs is that they are only trained to look for wounds of the past and emotion as the presence of the Holy Spirit. To place a vulnerable soul in this care is negligent behavior. It stands to reason that the unskilled “prayer minister” will only look for what they are trained to look for and as the adage goes, “when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” Again, the method alone does not leave room for the nuances of grace and reason, and ignores the complexity of the human condition. People get hurt in these situations, and it is extra painful because we are talking about claims of God’s presence.

Another problem that arises from an overly spiritualized approach is a lack of structure and appropriate emotional boundaries. Often, there is an expectation within the milieu of these groups to expose your deepest wounds to a stranger or the group at large. This fails to honor the positive aspect of shame as discussed in JPII’s *Theology of the Body* (12:1). Simply stated, JPII recognizes that shame exists in our fallen world as a means to safeguard the mystery and inherent goodness of the human person. It is good for us to have a healthy sense of emotional modesty<sup>1</sup>. To fully expose oneself emotionally to a group or individual who have not proven themselves trustworthy, leaves people overly vulnerable and the potential for hurt is great. On this side of heaven, emotional intimacy is only capable with a small number of people; usually our spouses, family, close confidants, spiritual directors, counselors, and even in ongoing group therapy. To make the expectation that recipients should come for a weekend event and pour out all of their deepest secrets in a brief prayer session is reckless behavior.

### 3. Miracles

Often at these events, there is an expectation of miracles and signs and wonders. To claim that there is a formulated approach to getting a miracle can only mean one of three things: it is

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<sup>1</sup> Certainly, one can go to the other extreme, repress their emotions, and never open up to a trusted other; this can lead to emotional isolation. I am merely proposing the need for a healthy balance with emotional vulnerability.

Liturgical (ie: Mass), it is superstition, or something on the natural plain is occurring. In Jason Evert's book *St John Paul the Great: His Five Loves* (pg. 187) he states that JPII had many miracles occur because of his prayers while alive on Earth; but when he was asked about this JPII stated that miracles are up to God and no reason to dwell on it or attempt to figure it out. Generally, God honors creation and human reason and has given us many natural methods for healing; and while it is certainly up to him to bring about a miracle whenever he chooses, it is presumption on our part to claim that we have a foolproof way of getting that miracle. Making claims or promises that healing will occur at a conference or event simply cannot be done, and to do so is both bad theology and a violation of professional counseling ethical codes. Precisely for this reason, the "Instructions on Prayers for Healing" issued by the Congregation for Doctrine of Faith in 2000 was written in a language that moved away from "healing prayer" to "prayers for healing." Making this shift is crucial because 'healing prayer' denotes automatism while 'prayers for healing' puts the practice in the realm of intercessory prayer and leaves true openness to the response of the Holy Spirit. This echoes the previously used quote from *A School of Prayer*.

Practically speaking, often there is a claim that one is healed from the prayer experience when in fact they are not. They leave the conference thinking that they are healed and no longer continue the work of good psychotherapy. This is a problem and a direct result of false claims or assertions made by these leaders. Worse still is when someone is lead to a traumatic memory and there is no appropriate follow-up care to help them deal with their pain. They go home far worse and without care.

We must trust and appeal to the prudential ways of the Catholic Church. It is hard to determine the work of grace in our lives. Precisely for this reason, the Church is slow to make determinations about miracles, sainthood, and apparitions. Inner Healing 'prayer' disregards that prudential approach that is part of our Catholic tradition and falls well into the realm of presumption. Rather a healthier alternative honors both faith and reason, which as JPII stated in his opening of *Fides et Ratio*, "are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth."

Here it must be stated that emotional healing and spiritual healing are not synonymous terms. To do so leaves no room for the role of redemptive suffering in the growth of the person's soul. Benedict Groeshel in *Spiritual Passages* (pg. 118) describes that as one progresses in the spiritual life, there is a decrease in deep existential anxiety. I believe this to be true, however suffering often is the vehicle that allows that deep peace to abide in our hearts. Let us not pigeonhole the work of the Holy Spirit through fundamentalist approaches to healing, but rather take a fuller approach that truly honors the whole person.

When Inner Healing "Prayer" does work it is because of the natural healing that occurs when we bear our deepest longings to another and feel their unconditional acceptance and love. As I alluded to earlier, this vulnerability needs to be done appropriately and not forced by groupthink. We absolutely need people in our lives that can see us as we really are, but usually that takes time and trust to be achieved. Brené Brown in, *Daring Greatly*, states that shame gets washed away in the empathy of another (pg. 75). JPII goes further in *Love and Responsibility* (pg. 181), by writing that shame gets swallowed up by love. True intimacy and relationship are what brings healing, not the overly spiritualized magic tricks. The real miracle is the grace of baptism and confirmation that allows one to become a sacramental sign of God's love and to be capable of receiving that love. The body and only the body makes visible what is invisible, as stated in the *Theology of the Body* (19:4). This is the gift of authentic relationship that leads to Christ and it does not need to be contrived by emotionalism or superstition.

#### 4. Demonic Presence

A major aspect of these approaches is an exaggerated focus on demonic activity. For a much more thorough explanation on the topic, I will point the reader to the work of Cardinal Suenens and his text on the subject, *Renewal and the Powers of Darkness*, in particular Chapters 10-11, which offer great clarity to the theological and psychological dangers in popular deliverance practices. Yes, I do believe it is right to not ignore this topic and remind people that the devil is real, but many of the supposed remedies offered through deliverance prayers are superstition and tend to increase people's fear of the devil. It also further complicates the presenting issues by drawing attention away from the real problems and fixates on demonic activity. The irony is that this is what the devil wants: attention on himself and not the Lord. *The Screwtape Letters* by CS Lewis does a wonderful job of exposing the many tricks and temptations used by devils in attempt to lure us away from the Lord.

Furthermore, many of the "family tree" healing prayers ignore the grace of baptism, where in the rite there is an exorcism prayer. Yes, if a person is genuinely possessed, all bets are off and the exorcist must examine any possibility as to why the possession has occurred, but full possessions are rare. Most of us are fine when imploring Ignatian discernment of spirits principles that focus on real solutions, real growth in human virtue, and not just quick-fix prayers. I know that there is a place for deliverance prayers, but I believe that the approaches in question lead to fear and fixation on spiritual activities at the negation of natural methods to healing. For example, one can certainly claim that certain sins are generational (i.e.: my dad's dad was alcoholic, which affected my dad, which in turn affected the way he fathered me...), but the solution is to deal with the actual issue of alcoholism through recovery and an appeal to mercy. To be overly distracted with some 'plaguing demon' on the family tree unnecessarily complicates the issue. Moreover, in prematurely jumping to the supernatural realm, this family would not focus its attention on the real solutions to the problem. Yet, if by chance there was plaguing demon tormenting this individual, the required solution is more than what can be accomplished by lay people and this person would need a well-trained priest.

#### Conclusion

I hope that you can see a thread throughout this post...there are major problems when an environment becomes overly spiritualized and ignores the gift of human reason, the complexities of the human condition, and makes debased claims about supernatural and preternatural matters. There are no quick fixes and anyone who claims to have one is promoting a potentially damaging situation. Nothing can substitute the arduous path of healing and growth; unless it is a genuine miracle from the Lord.

Certainly, we cannot throw out the baby with the bathwater and state that prayer has no room in counseling. I pray with each of my clients who are open to it. Also, I try to be docile to the Spirit and hope that he is present in my sessions. However, my assertion stands that these fundamentalist approaches to 'healing prayer' negate the full operations of the Holy Spirit in the life of the counselee and counselor. Yes, the Holy Spirit guides me as a counselor; but when I sit in the counseling room, He uses all things to help me help my client: my temperament, clinical training, experience, expertise, books I have read, prayer, therapeutic interventions, personal maturity, active listening skills, and reason. All things are at his disposal...including time and redemptive suffering.

I discourage anyone reading this to attend these types of conferences until there is greater clarity on these methods and approaches by the Church. Instead, try to find well-trained Catholic

clinicians in your area by contacting your parish, diocesan family life office, online databases such as [wellcatholic.com](http://wellcatholic.com) and [catholictherapists.com](http://catholictherapists.com), or through the Catholic Psychotherapy Association.

Please leave respectful comments below. I wrote this in charity and I expect the same in return. I believe there is real dialogue that needs to occur on these topics and may the Lord guide us to better understand his ways.