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The Priest With Healing Hands

By J. LEE GRADY (June 30, 2004)

Francis MacNutt has introduced thousands of Christians to miraculous healing. Now 79, he hopes to train an army of healers to take his place.

There's something calm and comforting about the way Francis MacNutt heals the sick. He rarely raises his voice except when confronting evil spirits. Yet when the 79-year-old priest gently lays his hands on a sick person's head or shoulders, they often say God touches them at the same moment he whispers the name "Jesus."

In the 37 years that MacNutt has claimed the gift of supernatural healing, he has seen people cured of everything from asthma, allergies and heart disease to high blood pressure, cancer and torn arches. He once prayed for a woman and then watched as her foot grew to its normal size, from size 5 to 7-1/2. In 1982 a woman's brain tumor disappeared when he prayed--and after she returned home to South Carolina her doctor documented the miracle.

MacNutt's methods are not always orthodox. Often he will stand in front of an audience and sing in an unknown language. He doesn't know what he's saying, and neither do the people in the crowd, but listeners are sometimes healed just by hearing the heavenly glossolalia.

"I feel stupid doing it," he says of the unusual practice. "I've been doing it for 25 years and it still feels funny."

Once, a woman was healed when MacNutt simply looked at her. What's more common in his services is the phenomenon he calls "resting in the Spirit." After he lays hands on people, they fall to the floor and lie there for several minutes while they undergo soul surgery. A priest he prayed for in England lay on the floor for two hours and got up healed of depression.

MacNutt refers to depression as "the common cold of the mental health field," and he has lost count of those healed of it in his meetings. In recent years, people in MacNutt's services also have been cured of mental disorders as well as delivered of demons. A Brazilian woman who had consecrated herself to the devil--and signed the pact with her own blood--was freed after MacNutt spent an hour with her.

Despite his successful track record, however, you won't find this priest staging mass healing crusades in stadiums or broadcasting his meetings on Christian television. Sensationalism turns him off. He prefers the quiet approach.

And besides, MacNutt's research shows that only 1 percent of people are healed at large healing services. In contrast, 20 percent or more are healed when there is more time for individual prayer. He is not exactly sure why, except that he knows healing is not always instantaneous.

"Healing takes time," he says, speaking like a true veteran from his years of experience at the altar. "This is what is missing in most healing ministry today. We always want everything to be instant."

MacNutt prefers the slower, personal, hands-on approach. So much so that he once wrote a book about the therapeutic power of touch.

"I just listen, love and pray," he says of his simple formula--which he hopes to teach to the church worldwide before he dies.

Stranger in a Strange Land

MacNutt does not look 79. Although his gait is a bit slower these days and his voice sounds slightly worn, his blue eyes still beam as if electrically charged. He is plugged in to an invisible source of power.

Those who have followed him since the early days of his ministry know that he has clocked a lot of mileage since the peak years of the Catholic charismatic movement. After 14 years of college and seminary (he has degrees from Harvard University and The Catholic University of America) MacNutt was baptized in the Holy Spirit in 1967 through the influence of charismatic healing pioneer Agnes Sanford.

She prophesied that the enthusiastic Dominican priest would take supernatural healing to the Catholic Church worldwide--and the prediction rapidly proved accurate. He took his newfound Pentecostalism to 30 countries, and a book he wrote in 1974, *Healing*, went on to sell 1 million copies.

Catholic nuns, priests, bishops and laypeople all embraced MacNutt's nontraditional teachings about healing, speaking in tongues and deliverance from demons. When he preached at a clergy retreat in Australia in the 1970s, all 220 priests in attendance were filled with the Holy Spirit. By the time he left his native St. Louis in 1980, the majority of priests in the city were involved in charismatic prayer groups.

He was as much of a phenomenon in Catholic charismatic circles as flamboyant healing evangelist Kathryn Kuhlman was among mainline Protestants. In fact, Kuhlman prayed for him at one of her meetings in Pittsburgh in 1969. (MacNutt apologetically insists that Kuhlman pushed him to the floor, though admitting that he has fallen under the power of the Holy Spirit more than 75 times in various meetings.)

MacNutt's glorious days of favor and applause ended abruptly in 1980 when he did something his Catholic brethren could not accept: He married.

And to complicate the matter, he married not a Catholic but a Southern Baptist psychologist, Judith Sewell, whom he had met at a Catholic charismatic community in Clearwater, Florida.

The Catholics may have been open to a priest who spoke in tongues and healed the sick, but they certainly would not stomach one who broke his clerical celibacy vow to marry a woman young enough to be his daughter. A scandal erupted that sent shock waves all the way to the Vatican.

MacNutt remembers the pain he felt when the church rejected him. "There was a lot going against our decision [to marry]," he says. "The leaders were mostly against it. I was 54 and she was 32.

"Everyone was saying to me: 'You can't do this! You've made a vow! This will destroy the great ministry God has given you!' One Catholic leader just cried."

It was difficult for Judith to watch her husband suffer. "It's a deep sadness that a person like Francis had to lose the fellowship of a church he loved so much," she told Charisma.

Doors were slammed in MacNutt's face from that point on. He was officially excommunicated, denied the sacraments and stripped of all clergy privilege. But the newlyweds couldn't just stop preaching about the new life of the Holy Spirit they had discovered. So they found other places to minister.

Some Catholics were still open to their message of healing, but after the excommunication the MacNutt's began to receive speaking invitations from Episcopalians, Presbyterians and Pentecostal groups. And because MacNutt's clerical collar was gone, Protestants who might have been wary of his Catholic ways found him more acceptable. One door had closed, but several new ones opened.

Mike Evans was a Baptist when he heard MacNutt speak in Bakersfield, California, in 1987. He was as skeptical of Catholics as he was of charismatics, but when he heard MacNutt speak on healing he embraced the charismatic experience and eventually became one of MacNutt's closest colleagues.

"Francis is the most gracious, humble man I've ever met," Evans says today. "I believe his greatest contribution is his ability to move among a variety of churches and groups, bringing reconciliation and healing."

By 1987, when the MacNutt's moved to Jacksonville, Florida, at the invitation of an Episcopal priest, their ministry was welcomed more in Protestant circles than in Catholic ones. The couple purchased an unused Episcopal church building and turned it into the headquarters for Christian Healing Ministries, where they now operate a school of healing with a staff of 18.

The move to Florida was by no means a step toward retirement--a term MacNutt avoids. His travel schedule today is rigorous, although he manages to fit in time for his favorite hobby of bird watching. (He personally has identified 540 birds in North America and once traveled to the Florida Keys to spot the rare frigate bird.)

Today, the MacNutt's' goal is to train as many Christians as possible to heal the sick the same way Jesus did.

"We wouldn't have to have this healing center if all churches were fully empowered to minister healing," says Judith, who was healed of a precancerous condition the year before she married. Doctors told her she may have to have a hysterectomy, but after her marriage she conceived.

"The sad thing is that people fly here from all over the world because the church isn't helping them," she adds.

Judith eventually wrote a book with her husband, titled *How to Pray for Your Unborn Child*. Her prayers obviously worked. Today the MacNutts' two children, Rachel and David, are 22 and 20 respectively.

Partners in Healing

MacNutt's Catholic colleagues may or may not agree today, but it's obvious that Judith is the best thing that ever happened to him aside from his dramatic encounter with the Holy Spirit years earlier. In his case, marriage was a very good idea--even if it violated an antiquated tradition and upset the Catholic hierarchy in the process.

Before the MacNutts met, Judith worked as a psychologist at a Boston hospital. After one of her mentally ill patients committed suicide, she cried out to God in frustration--discouraged that her counseling efforts hadn't made a difference.

She says God answered her clearly and gave her a strategy: "Bring them to Me, and I will heal them."

"I realized then that people would not be made whole just through psychology," she told *Charisma*. "Psychology can give us skills to help others, but it doesn't heal people. If you have been severely wounded, it is not enough to change you."

Judith began to blend her psychological training with biblical principles of healing and faith. Eventually she became an expert on emotional healing, and she taught others how to use prayer to heal mental disorders, phobias, painful memories and even sexual disorders at a time when few Christians talked about homosexuality--and fewer believed Jesus actually could heal a gay person.

When the MacNutts married in 1980, they began a union of two uniquely gifted healers. While doors of opportunity were slamming in their faces because of their marriage (the Catholic Church finally recognized their union 13 years later), their anointing for healing seemed to be increasing. They also started to encounter more sinister forces during their praying and became experts in deliverance without aspiring to such an odd vocation.

The MacNutts have seen it all since they began casting out demons. They've confronted spirits of lust, perversion, violence and occultism. They've prayed for victims of satanic ritual abuse but are quick to note that they don't go looking for Exorcist-style spinning heads, projectile vomiting or other sensational manifestations of the devil.

"We are ministering to people, not demons," Judith says in her faint Kentucky drawl. "Deliverance ministry is not all about people writhing on the floor, although we have seen that."

What motivates their deliverance ministry is not a taste for the sensational but a love for people.

"People have told me: 'Francis, why do you waste your time [with the mentally ill]? You're just holding hands with a bunch of nuts.'"

But the MacNutts have solved too many "nut" cases to be deterred by the skeptics and the armchair critics. What they want the church to know is that healing and deliverance ministry is not an exotic ritual reserved for the chosen few. It is the call of every believer.

That was their message in late 2003 when they took a small ministry team to Scotland to introduce Presbyterian leaders to the work of the Holy Spirit. Although MacNutt's preaching style was soft-spoken, as usual, the results he witnessed in Scotland were anything but mild-mannered.

A healing service at St. Cuthbert's Presbyterian Church in Edinburgh drew 400 people and lasted until 2:30 a.m. Before it ended, dozens of Presbyterian ministers had been baptized in the Holy Spirit. After a two-day lecture on healing held at a university in Edinburgh, the MacNutts held a deliverance service during which they prayed for a distinguished-looking elderly woman. Before her deliverance she was propelled backward several feet on the platform while baffled Presbyterians watched.

MacNutt intends to stage similar demonstrations of God's power everywhere he goes, especially among more traditional-minded Christians. He is especially grieved that churches in the West, including his own Catholic Church, have quenched the Holy Spirit's work.

"In this country the move of the Holy Spirit has been domesticated," MacNutt told Charisma. "But in other parts of the world it's growing so explosively that the largest group of Christians next to the Roman Catholics are the Pentecostals.

"Most mainline Protestants in this country don't realize they are outnumbered. They still see charismatics and Pentecostals as fringe groups. They don't realize that the main centers of Christianity 25 years from now will not be Rome, Geneva and New York but New Delhi, Lagos and other exotic centers."

Comments like those may not get MacNutt an audience with the pope or curry favor with traditionalist leaders from any denomination. That's OK with him, provided that he can reach the people in the pews--anyone who's hungry to know more about the deeper things of God.

As long as Francis MacNutt has breath in his body and healing in his hands, he will spread the life of the Spirit to those who need a touch.

Veterans of Healing

Francis and Judith MacNutt believe every Christian can be taught to minister.

Francis MacNutt's hands are not as steady as they were 30 years ago, but he is as eager to pray for the sick today as he was during the heyday of the charismatic renewal movement.

At the same time, however, MacNutt knows his limitations. He can't go everywhere and heal everybody, and he'll be passing his mantle to someone else one day. That's why he and his wife, Judith, have focused their energies on training a new generation of Christians to heal the sick.

"Healing is a gift, but we have to learn how to use it," Judith says. "We have to train prayer ministers, and churches need to empower them."

The MacNutts offer that empowerment through an extensive series of training videos as well as a School of Healing Prayer, offered at their Jacksonville, Florida-based headquarters. The course covers everything from "Healing of Abortion and Miscarriage" to "Healing of Addictions" to "Healing Our Image of God."

The MacNutts teach that emotional healing is an often-ignored tool. They have promoted their message in numerous books including *The Prayer That Heals* and *Deliverance from Evil Spirits*.

"In a lot of churches there is still no understanding of the need to bring all the healing disciplines together," Judith says. "In some denominations you'll find an understanding of deliverance ministry, but they have no clue about inner healing. Yet 90 percent of all demonic activity is based on trauma or wounding. Many will cast a demon out of someone, but they won't do the inner healing work that heals the wound, so the demon comes back."

Francis MacNutt wants to pass on several important principles of healing prayer. Among them:

- 1. Prayer requires discernment.** The key to effective healing, he says, is knowing what to pray for. This understanding only comes by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- 2. Healing requires time.** The MacNutts advocate what they call "soaking prayer"--in which prayer ministers lay hands on a person and pray for an extended period. "Healing takes time, and that is what is missing in a lot of healing ministry," he says.
- 3. Emotions need healing.** The MacNutts believe that grief, shame, panic attacks, mental disorders, sexual hang-ups and addictions can all be healed by Jesus. Often the healing requires the affected person to renounce hurtful vows, forgive those who hurt them or invite Christ to heal a painful memory.
- 4. Demons are real.** Francis has never shied away from confronting spiritual darkness, and he challenges Christians today to learn how to cast out devils.

For more information about Francis and Judith MacNutt's ministry, or to receive prayer, write Christian Healing Ministries, P.O. Box 9520, Jacksonville, FL 32208; call 904-765-3332; or e-mail healingline@christianhealingmin.org.