

PALLIATIVE CARE: A THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

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Abstract: This article argues that a Roman Catholic theology of palliative care must be rooted in the sacramental ministry of the Church. If Jesus Christ is the Sacrament of God, then the Church is rightly understood as the Sacrament of Jesus Christ. The Church's nature is realised most fully in and through the individual sacraments, since in this way she makes Christ present, and is his continuation. The Christ whom the Church makes present embodies an intensity of suffering and compassion which must lie at the heart of the palliative care offered by God's people to the sick.

The Editors

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Introduction

From earliest times the Church has continued the healing, forgiving and comforting mission of Jesus. Today in the reformed rites of the sacraments of Anointing and Viaticum, all Christians are urged to visit the sick, remember them in prayer, and celebrate the sacraments with them, because the sick are the common responsibility of the Church.

Much has been written on the subject of holistic care and on the subject of palliative care from a humanist perspective, but very little from the Christian theological viewpoint. It is my intention to offer some theological reflection, in order that it may contribute to the development of a "**Theology of Palliative Care**". I will also argue that palliative care from a "Roman Catholic" viewpoint must find its root in the sacramental ministry of the Church.

Jesus Christ : Ethic and Sacrament

In the writings of the prophet Micah we hear the words: "He has told you O mortal, what is good; and what the Lord requires of you, to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic 6:8).

It sounds simple and straightforward enough. Justice and mercy and the reality of walking with God are required of those who wish to do good. Justice and mercy are the domain of ethics. Walking with God

is prayer and reflection, liturgy, ritual and sacraments.

Ethics and liturgy are the contemporary expressions of faith, combining past, present and future in the continuing story and history of the people of God. It is in people that religious beliefs are manifested in values, ethics, and in a way of being in the world, often in a world that does not believe in the shared history, traditions, and experience of God. The ethics and liturgy of a people become the manifestation of the glory of God to the earth.

The shared history and tradition of the Christian community are handed down to us in the words of St. Paul as he speaks formally to the church in Corinth:

For I have received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Cor 11:23-27).

This is the ritual, the sacrament, and the liturgy of the Church, the following words connect sacrament to life ethic:

"Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, 'and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves'. (1 Cor 11:27-29).

To participate in the ritual and not to live its reality in life is to call down judgement on us. Ethics and sacraments in a Christian's life are intimately bound up together.

The tie that binds believers in both sacrament and ethic is the person of Jesus Christ. It is he who breaks the bread and shares the cup. It is he who is present in the bread and wine. It is he who takes the lead, gives the command, and renews the old ways of "doing justice, loving tenderly and walking humbly with our God." It is he who is the sacrament. It is his life that is the ethic (McKenna 1997).

Jesus Christ : Sacrament of God

The faith conviction that Jesus is the sacrament of God is deeply rooted in the New Testament. The witness to the events of his life, his dealings with human beings, show how much he was in his person, a 'sign', a making visible of the presence of God. His whole life but especially its high points, and his death, are the real symbols of the concrete presence of God. Herbert Vorgrimler(1992) writes:

"The later understanding of Christ reflected in the New Testament gave the first emphasis to this sacramentality of Jesus. Without losing his personal character, says Augustine Schmied, Jesus as the Christ attracted to himself the power of primal human symbols (light, well-spring, shepherd, door, bread). He could be called the icon, the image of God pure and simple (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15), the visible epiphany of the invisible essence of God (Heb 1:1-2; John 1:1; also John 14:9)"

Thomas Aquinas understood Jesus Christ to be the "fundamental sacrament, in so far as his human nature, as the instrument of divinity, effects salvation" (Vorgrimler 1992). Carl Fecks (d.1958) was the first person in the twentieth century who, in reviving these ideas, called Jesus Christ the "primordial sacrament [*Ursakrament*]" on whom rest the "sacramental world" of the Church and the individual

sacraments. Edward Schillebeeckx (1960) describes Jesus Christ as sacrament of encounter with God. He saw the humanity of Jesus Christ as the primordial sacrament, since it was in his humanity that there occurs the twofold movement consisting of the in-breaking of grace "from above," and the cultus of love of God from below.

Jesus Christ takes words and makes them into an announcement of the kingdom of God. He dares to call Yahweh God his Father and exhorts his friends to call God by this new name. In doing so they accept a new relationship as sons and daughters of God, no longer servants but brothers and sisters to Jesus, Lord in the kingdom of God. Jesus gives ritual to his friends: take, give thanks, break, pass it around. "Do this in remembrance of me" (Lk 22:14-19). This is the formula for the celebration of the Eucharist, our way of giving thanks to God in Jesus, for Jesus. with Jesus. The ritual celebrates the life of Jesus Christ, who took all of creation as a gift from God. It is Jesus Christ who takes any gift whether a few loaves and fishes from a young boy, or the desire of a Pharisee who climbs a tree because he wants to see Jesus, or a hand reaching out in trust to touch the hem of his cloak. He takes all these gifts and breaks them open, making them new, and passing them around. In these gifts is a new covenant, a new testament, a new promise, a new tie that binds together. Jesus takes hearts and finds love, he takes fields and finds treasure hidden within; he finds trees and nests of safety in the tiny mustard seed. He uncovers the kingdom of God, his Father everywhere in creation. And he says to his followers: do this and you'll remember me.

The Church : Sacrament of Jesus Christ

The ecclesiology of the New Testament conceives the Church from the beginning, as the community of disciples who, filled and guided by the divine Spirit, continue the mission of Jesus Christ. The New Testament Church recognises its complete dependence on Jesus Christ, as it is being formed by the Holy Spirit into a useful instrument of the continuing presence of Jesus Christ. The description of the local church as the body of Christ made up of many members united by the divine Spirit, as described in Romans and 1 Corinthians, with Jesus Christ as its head (Ephesians, Philippians), is taken up by the Second Vatican Council in its Constitution on the Church. In the first article on the Constitution on the

Church, the Council declared in a clear and decisive way, that by virtue of its relationship to Christ "the church is a kind of sacrament of intimate union with God and of the unity of all mankind; that is, she is a sign and instrument of such unity." This theme of the Church as sacrament recurs in many key passages of the Council documents.

Many twentieth-century Catholic theologians appeal to the concept of the Church as sacrament. This ecclesiology, which finds its roots in the works of Cyprian, Augustine, Aquinas, and Scheeben, emerges in full clarity in our own century, and most recently in contemporary times. In his work *Models of Church*, Avery Dulles S.J.(1988), cites Henri de Lubac as arguing that the divine and the human in the Church can never be dissociated. An excessively spiritual and individualistic view of the life of grace, he maintained, leads to a merely secular and sociological understanding of the Church as institution. The notion of sacrament on the other hand, harmoniously combines both aspects.

If Christ is the sacrament of God, the Church is for us the sacrament of Christ; she represents him, in the full and ancient meaning of the term, she really makes him present. She not only carries on his work, but she is his very continuation, in a sense far more real than that in which it can be said that any human institution is its founder's continuation.

Sacrament and sacraments: the Church's 'self realisations'

The sacramental worship of the Church is given a certain primacy over all other forms of Christian life. "The liturgy" is the summit toward which the activity of the church is directed; at the same time it is the fountain from which all her power flows. For the goal of the apostolic works is that all who are made sons of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of His Church, to take part in the Sacrifice and to eat the Lord's supper.

In the same Constitution we read that the Church "reveals herself most clearly when a full complement of God's holy people, united in prayer and in a common liturgical service (especially the Eucharist)" actively participate in the official worship of the church together with their bishop and priests. Thus the Council discerns a connection between the

Church as a primordial sacrament and the seven ritual sacraments that express, in privileged ways, the sacramentality of the Church as a whole (Dulles 1988).

In the words of the Constitution on the sacred liturgy; "Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy, and to which the Christian people," a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people (1 Pet 2A, 4-5) have a right and obligation by reason of their baptism.

If as the Second Vatican Council says, the Church is the universal saving sacrament of Jesus Christ, the Church must then exist as concretely as sacraments must concretely perform their function as signs and instruments. The realisation occurs in *martyria*, *leitourgia*, and *diakonia*, (witness, liturgy and service), since in all three forms of the Church's service the effective saving will of God must be apparent. The outstanding form in which the Church's liturgy is actualised is the praxis of the individual sacraments in concrete liturgical assemblies no matter how small. Edward Schillebeeckx interpreted the individual sacraments as ecclesial manifestation of Christ's divine love for humanity (gift of grace) and human love for God (cult), sacraments are thus grounded Christologically and ecclesologically. Karl Rahner describes the individual sacraments of the Church as self realisations of the Church at the highest level of actuality, that of "official historically described publicness." This enabled him to call the individual sacraments "the essential fundamental realisations of the Church itself, situated at the critical moments in the salvation history of each individual human being".

The Church as Sacrament : outer and inner aspects

The Church therefore in the first instance is a sign. It must signify in a historically tangible form, the redeeming grace of Christ. As a sacrament the Church has both an outer and an inner aspect. The institutional or structural aspect of the Church, its external reality, is essential, since without it the Church would not be visible. Visible unity among all Christians is demanded, for without this, the sign or communion that the Church is would be fragmented

into a multitude of disconnected signs. It is therefore of crucial importance that there should be manifest links of continuity among all the particular churches at any given time. It is also important that the links should connect the Church of today with the Church of apostolic times. Otherwise the Church could not appear as the sign of our redemption in and through the historical Christ.

However, this institutional or structural aspect is never sufficient to constitute the Church. The offices and rituals of the Church must be seen as the expressions of the faith, hope, and love of a living people. If the Church fails to be seen as a living Christian community, then it fails to be an authentic sign and therefore not the sacrament of Jesus Christ. The more widely the faithful participate in this corporate action of the Church, the more the Church achieves itself.

Making Christ present : suffering and compassion

The Church as the sacrament of Jesus Christ represents him in the full and ancient meaning of the term, she makes him present, she carries on his work and is his very continuation. "The word became 'flesh and made his dwelling among us" (Jn 1;14). With these words we learn that God is like us. He has been born, lives, suffers and dies with us.

Often we confine Jesus' suffering to his passion and death, but to be human is to suffer, and Jesus suffered a great deal throughout his life. He was born in poverty and in the midst of political intrigue. In his public life there is much pain, rejection and suffering. He is misunderstood, mocked, feared, and hated. He becomes the source of division among his family and friends. His initiation into public life is heralded by the gruesome death of his cousin John, beheaded at a dinner party. Steeped in the psalms and prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus describes himself as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. He is aware of what Jerusalem does to her prophets, and tries to warn his friends and disciples, "The Son of Man must suffer much, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, be put to death and rise three days later" (Mk 8:31). When they do not understand he describes it in more detail: "We are on our way up to Jerusalem where the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes. They will condemn him to death and hand

him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit at him, flog him and finally kill him" (Mk 10:33). He lives with the reality of brutal death always in the back of his mind, haunting him. He is afraid.

Nevertheless, Jesus heals others of their sickness and infirmity. He gives sight to the blind, speech to the mute, hearing to the deaf; he gives wholeness back to lepers and releases men and women from debilitating illnesses and exclusion by others. He heals in compassion. Jesus tells his disciples that they must "be compassionate as their heavenly Father is compassionate" (Mt 5:48).

There is a beautiful expression in the Gospels that appears only twelve times and is used exclusively in reference to Jesus or his Father. That expression is "to be moved with compassion." The Greek verb *splangchnizonai* reveals to us the deep and powerful meaning of this expression. The *splangchna* are the entrails of the body, or as we might say today the guts. They are the place where our most intimate and intense emotions are located. They are the centre from which both passionate love and passionate hate grow. When the gospels speak about Jesus' compassion as being moved in the entrails, they are expressing something very deep and mysterious. The compassion that Jesus felt was obviously quite different from superficial or passing feelings of sorrow or sympathy. Rather it is extended to the most vulnerable part of his being. It is related to the Hebrew word for compassion *rachamin*, which refers to the womb of Yahweh. Indeed compassion is such a deep, central and powerful emotion in Jesus that it can only be described as a movement of the womb of God. There, all the divine tenderness and gentleness lies hidden. There, God is father and mother, brother and sister, son and daughter. There, all feelings, emotions and passions are one in divine love. When Jesus was moved to compassion, the source of all life trembled, the ground of love burst open and the abyss of God's immense, inexhaustible, and unfathomable tenderness revealed itself (MacNeil, Morrison, Nouwen 1982).

This central and powerful emotion in Jesus, introduces us to the choice for life with compassion. Jesus healed people in a holistic way, not only did he cure their infirmity or deformity, allowing them to participate in the worship of the community, he forgave them of their sins, bestowing inner healing and

peace, restoring them to the covenant relationship with God.

Towards a Theology of Palliative Care

Human Science has re-discovered the biblical concept of the human person as a psychosomatic unity. The medical profession has responded to this re-discovery by providing "palliative care" for people suffering from incurable or terminal illness. The example of Jesus' compassionate care for the sick introduces us to the care of others in the palliative sense, with the sacrament of anointing and pastoral care of the sick.

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