

PALLIATIVE CARE : A THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

PALLIATIVE CARE IN THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

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Abstract: This article seeks to explore the richness of meaning contained within the sacrament of the anointing of the sick. In circumstances where a person receiving palliative care is struggling against illness, the sacrament supports them in that struggle, and yet points beyond it towards a gradual acceptance of powerlessness. The author explores the themes of powerlessness and hope, and describes a powerlessness out of which hope may spring, because it is an entering into Christ's own experience. It becomes therefore a prelude to resurrection hope. The sacrament of the sick encourages and engenders this hope, which is wider than the individual, and extends to the whole body of Christ. The sacrament is also an invitation to action; to a caring, a solidarity in suffering and a compassion which imply a deeper sharing in the very life of Christ.

The editors.

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Introduction

My previous article 'Sacrament of anointing and Pastoral Care of the Sick'(SJHC 5:1) makes the distinction between the pastoral care of the sick and the pastoral care of the dying. Yet we must also recognise that in the *palliative* care of a person, that person may effectively remain in the first category for a considerable period of time. Although the diagnosis of a patient's illness is often quite specific, the prognosis can be much less certain. Some patients suffering from terminal cancer can experience remission; stroke victims and people with dementia often experience an unpredictable period of long term care that may span several years. It is therefore difficult, except in the very obvious last stages of life, to determine when the 'pastoral care of the dying' is a more appropriate form of ministry than the 'pastoral care of the sick'. It is important for us to remember that dying people are actually living people, men and women living whatever time is left to them with a desperate urgency. The first desire upon anyone who is a victim of pain and suffering is to be free of it. The sacrament of the anointing of the sick, it seems, is completely in tune with this; it supports the sick person in their struggle against illness.

When we approach the celebration of the sacrament of the Anointing the Sick with this understanding of the purpose of the sacrament, it give us the confidence to help us prepare the sick person to receive the sacrament, helping the sick person to understand what the sacrament is about and to help the sick person achieve the correct disposition to receive it. When the sick person has clear desire to struggle against the effects of the illness, the sacrament supports them in that struggle. This approach makes sense of the sacrament yet does not claim too much for it. The celebration is not aiming directly towards healing, but if healing should follow that is not inconsistent with the genuine wish of the sick person. And yet, in disposing themselves to receive the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, sick people are, at the very least, beginning to acknowledge their helplessness.

Helplessness or Powerlessness?

Rumbold (in Soulen 1975) explores the idea that the central issue in understanding the human response to death is helplessness. This sense of fundamental helplessness affects not only people who are dying, but also those around them; family and professionals. It is helplessness which lies behind those individual and institutional responses in the face of

death which rage against it or seek to submerge it, resulting in so many of the problems of modern dying: failures in communication; the aloneness of the dying person; the stigma of grief; professionals distancing themselves from their patients or colleagues.

This helplessness is the powerlessness, bewilderment and fear, referred to in my previous article, that may enable us to turn to God with an agonised plea for help.

Although it may seem like a fine distinction, I am more inclined to describe the helplessness that Rumbold speaks of as powerlessness. Helplessness conjures up a vision of total paralysis of mind, body, and possibly even spirit, whereas powerlessness introduces us to the notion of something, or some situation, over which we have no control, which is not only controlling but also determining of the quality of our very existence. The key to regaining a sense of hope in this situation lies in the acceptance of our powerlessness and in the realisation of our createdness. It is initially through the re-discovery of the relationship between the Creator and we the created; the "I – Thou" relationship, that hope can in time be re-discovered.

The tremendous successes of self help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics and Gamblers Anonymous, and "living with cancer support groups", is due to the spiritual programs promoted by each of these fellowships. Their fundamental starting point is the same: these are programs of "recovery" that demand an acceptance of powerlessness over a particular substance or situation, but deny helplessness in that situation. Recovery is possible through the acknowledgment of the Creator – Created relationship; the sufferer is powerless, the Creator has power, power to restore hope and right thinking. The future is hopeful if managed in the present moment; one day at a time.

*"Each of us is a marvel of gifts;
talents, dynamism, energy, aptitudes,
but we remain limited, and good as we may be,
we cannot sustain the weight of more than 24 hours.
If we take on our shoulders the weight of the weeks,
months and years we have to live,
if we burden ourselves with the future,
we will become unbalanced;
our problems will wear us out,
and we will be overcome by stress,*

*and we will end up being crushed under a cross that
overwhelms us.*

*God the creator of human beings,
promised to help us one day at a time,
just for today.*

*To live the present moment
Is to march to the rhythm of nature;
It is to accept God's plan for me".*

(Parent 1991)

We cannot avoid this powerless condition, at most we can only raise our cry of protest and offer our resistance, this protest is the fundamental temptation of our whole life.

To enter anew into the "covenant" with the Creator, is to open ourselves fully to the grace of God, which empowers us to live with that which threatens to destroy us physically, mentally and spiritually. Our eschatological hope is renewed re-affirming our fundamental Christian faith.

The Journey towards Acceptance

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1975) famously describes a five stage journey towards the acceptance which is in a sense, acceptance of powerlessness. The first stage is denial; "this is not happening to me, there must be some mistake!" the second is anger; "why me?", the third, bargaining; "dear God if you make me well then I'll be much more committed to my faith!" the fourth, and often the most difficult is depression. Experience has repeatedly shown that if people are given the opportunity to learn the facts of their own case, then little by little, at their own pace, and provided they are encouraged to share with others the feelings which these facts evoke, and provided that others are not constantly feeding back to them their own fears, they will move progressively closer to stage five, a full realisation of the situation without suffering, overwhelming panic and despair.

Not every patient passes through these stages. Some patients, when realising that they are dying, then refuse to accept death; some cannot cope when confronted with the truth, and others are confronted with the truth and left without any hope. These patients then give up and turn to the wall, they suffer from the "giving up – given up" syndrome.

Some patients, who have been extremely anxious about their prognosis, have expressed relief when told of it, even when the information was not encouraging, underlining that one of the greatest human fears is the fear of the unknown. Some people begin to cope better when they know their prognosis.

Some relatives do not want the patient informed of a poor prognosis. It might be they are frightened of the patient's reaction, or that they think that if the bad news is ignored, "it might never happen". Others are faced with their own mortality and are afraid.

Partners should ideally discuss the prognosis and eventual death with each other, but often this requires the help of a facilitator so that this can be done in such a way as to allow people to take things at their own pace. Although both partners know the prognosis, some couples try to protect one another through fear of the other's reaction.

Only through facing the anxiety, darkness and revulsion of death can there be encouragement of the hope, which transcends these and sees the opportunities for growth.

Hope

Hope is not the same thing as wishful thinking or unfounded optimism, nor is it merely a set of concepts to be given intellectual assent. Rather, hope has its birth in a realistic assessment of our situation, and is grounded in our experiences and the values by which we live. It is confidence in the mercy and love of God, but it also accepts responsibility for cooperating with the saving grace that has been bestowed upon us, both at birth and in the sacraments. Jurgen Moltman(1967) describes hope as that virtue by which we take responsibility for the future, not simply our individual future but the future of the world. The Second Vatican Council(1992) also embraced this wider understanding of hope; "hope does not diminish the importance of our duties in this life but rather gives them special urgency".

Christian existence, therefore, is hope, but also existence that seeks to give hope to others.

Christ's Acceptance of Powerlessness

To be human is to suffer; we know that Jesus lived with the reality of a brutal death always in the back of his mind, we know that he was afraid, and never more so, then when in Gethsemane:

"...he said to his disciples, 'stay here while I pray.' Then he took Peter and James and John with him. And he began to feel terror and anguish. And he said to them, 'My soul is sorrowing to the point of death. Wait here and stay awake.' And going on a little further he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, this hour might pass him by. 'Abba, Father!' he said, 'For you everything is possible. Take this cup away from me. But let it be as you, not I would have it...'”(MK 14:32-37)

In his humanity Jesus was aware of his powerlessness. We can assume that he wasn't helpless in that he could have chosen to delay his torture and execution by escaping to the hills for a time, but he knew the hour of reckoning had come, he was powerless to do anything to change the minds and hearts of his enemies. In accepting his powerlessness he commended himself to the will of his father; "for you everything is possible."

The integrating insight here is that Jesus' movement towards death, is the conscious entry into his own ultimate poverty, the lived acknowledgment that he has nothing of his own. If we can accept what illness has to teach us, without necessarily despairing of recovery, then we will become aware of grace. Our own weakness becomes a gentle power of salvation, our void is mysteriously filled, and our apparent abandonment to our fate becomes an unforeseeable victory.

The prelude to resurrection is our powerlessness, a recognition that we are helpless in the face of death and finitude, and that only God can bring meaning out of this situation. Resurrection begins as hope given to us, enabling us to live creatively in spite of death; it comes as a new perception given by God's grace.

Depth of Care and Breadth of Hope

The hope, which characterizes the covenant relationship between God and his people, the Creator and the Creature, is expressed in the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick in very many ways. It is a reminder of membership of the Body of Christ. A reminder that the whole Body of Christ suffers together, and a reminder that compassion is care for others, in the palliative sense, with the sacrament of Anointing and the Pastoral Care of the Sick.

The crux of the sacrament of anointing and pastoral care of the sick is that we suffer with, mourn with, and ease the pain of others. If we lay hands on those who struggle against illness, anoint them with oil, and pray for their healing in mind, body and spirit, we are called to extend that prayer and action to all, especially those who most need such love, care and compassion. Pastoral care is ongoing, enduring, consistent, delicate, hard and very often repulsive. Physically caring for the sick and the dying is not easy, we can all have a tendency to romanticize about hands on care until we are face to face with it. We imagine the great consolation and explain away the drudgery, the mess and the smell. A Christian who looks on the face of one who suffers, has to see God, has to believe in the reality of God incarnate, suffering and loving us by sharing our life and death and offering us companionship and resurrection.

What we celebrate in the sacraments must be celebrated in the flesh or else the ritual will be shallow. Jesus' words are clear and simple:

"If anyone gives so much as a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is a disciple, then in truth I tell you, he will most certainly not go without his reward." (Mt 10:42)

What we celebrate in community, must find action in our daily lives. Simple things speak of the spirit's presence in the world, of mercy, of loving kindness, compassion, and being moved to pity like Jesus. We must in the face of life, hold each other's hands, find some sense of belonging together, of being truly in communion. Suffering can embitter us, save us, or gentle us. It can instruct us in the wisdom of God, and draw us into communion and share with us the passion of Christ. Jesus goes to Gethsemane, and we can follow. We can choose to sleep, or to watch and pray.

'As long as Christ lives and is remembered his friends will be those who suffer. Where no help is possible he appears not as the superior helper but only as the one who walks with those beyond help. That one bears the burden of the other is the simple and clear call that comes from all suffering. It is possible to help bear the burden, contrary to all talk about a person's final solitude. A society is conceivable in which no person is left totally alone, with no one to think of him and stay with him. Watching and praying are possible.'

'That people suffer and can be disconsolate is taken granted here. We should forbid ourselves of the dream of a person who needs no consolation. There is a time for weeping and a time for laughing. To need Consolation and to console are human, just as human as Christ was. We can change the social conditions under which people experience suffering. We can change ourselves and learn in suffering instead of becoming worse or insensitive. We can gradually beat back and abolish the suffering that still today is produced for the profit of a few. But on all these paths we come up against boundaries that cannot be crossed.'

Death is not the only such barrier. There are also brutalisation and insensibility, mutilation, and injury that no longer can be reversed. The only way these boundaries can be crossed is by sharing the pain of the sufferers with them, not leaving them alone and making their cry louder.' (Soelle 1975)

Through our Baptism we are called to witness to the power of life in Jesus Christ, to commit ourselves to be those who suffer; "If one member suffers in the Body of Christ which is the Church, all the members suffer with that member." (1Cor. 12:26)

In suffering we come of age as the children of God. Childhood in God has nothing to do with age, but with sight, belief, and response in compassion. Jesus is always the child of God, in his compassion; he takes the Law breaks it open to expose its spirit and life. Then he takes the hearts of men and women and breaks them open to see whether they are true or not. He takes weakness, sin and disease and breaks them open to find health, strength, peace and hope. Finally he takes death and within it finds everlasting life. Whatever he takes and breaks apart and blesses

God for, he shares with his friends and gives them the command; "Do this and you will remember me".

"Those who celebrate the sacrament of Jesus, do this: walk humbly with the father as Jesus walked, act justly, love tenderly. The story continues, the history unfolds, the mystery grows, and the manifestation to the world is announced again and again. God is with his people still." (McKenna 1997)

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