

Jubilee of Catholic doctors

The cure

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To be close to the man who suffers, is a categorical imperative of the Gospel. God himself is the first to give an example of this, from when he was moved by his people enslaved in Egypt to the fullness of the compassion of his Son who loved us to the point of death and 'death on a cross' (Phil 2:8). Sacred Scripture is in no way reticent about Jesus' identification with our own frailty, except in sin.

A great one emerges here: believers care for one another, especially with the frail. Unfortunately, not care but abandonment is the ordinary dimension in the lives of so many. Care calls for an attitude contrary to the much more fashionable one that puts the self at the centre. It is in fact called non-caring. It is only one word, but it weighs like a boulder: in a society of non-caring, the weaker you are, the more you are discarded.

To the culture of discarding we must counterpose the culture of care that goes beyond the dimension of health or healthcare alone. Care concerns first and foremost the level of interpersonal relationships. The very etymology of the term 'care' evokes the fundamental dimensions of existence. The term 'cure' refers to 'cor', to the heart, which some scholars link to the expression 'quia cor urat', because it warms the heart, urges it, involves it. That is why cure is closely linked to more, to compassion.

And it is significant that the main place where care takes place is the hospital, that is, a space defined by the practice of hospitality. Taking care of the other means not only worrying about his fate, but also, and above all, taking care of the other. Not to leave him/her alone.

The first area of care is the fight against loneliness. When the Lord God - seeing Adam alone - said: 'it is not good for man to be alone' he was emphasising loneliness as the radical disease. The first cure is fraternity, it is communion. And this is where healing begins: from loneliness to communion, from I to we.

This is also the profound meaning of the miracles described in the Gospels. One is struck by the space that is devoted in the Gospels to the healing of the sick by Jesus. Out of 53 miracles reported in the Gospels, as many as 30 involve healings of the sick. For Jesus this is one of the reasons for his mission: 'It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick' (Lk 5:31). The care and healing of the sick is an irrepressible constant. It is one of the two poles of Jesus' mission: "He went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues preaching the good news of the Kingdom and healing all manner of sickness and infirmity" (Mt 4:23). The scene described by Mark is beautiful: 'When evening came, after the setting of the sun, they brought him all the sick and the possessed. The whole city was gathered before the gate. He healed many who were afflicted with various diseases and cast out many demons' (Mk 1:32-34).

The healings are a sign that God is intervening in history. They are not a side action to the proclamation, they are signs that the Kingdom of God has begun in human history, that God has made himself close to the weak, that he wants to take care of everyone. Jesus gives this same power to the disciples: 'He gave them power and might over all demons and to heal diseases' (Lk 9:1). And he tells them that they would do greater works: 'Truly I tell you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do and will do greater works' (Jn 14:12). The disease must therefore be cured. It is to say: the disciples must take care of everyone starting with the sick, the most fragile such as the sick, widows and orphans. Caring for the sick and the weak is the way Christians live out their responsibility in human affairs.

That is why Christians in antiquity did not hesitate to call Jesus the 'doctor of Christians' and the Church a 'true clinic'. Origen taught: 'Know that (in the Gospels) Jesus healed every weakness and sickness not only at that time when these healings took place according to the flesh, but still heals today; know that he did not descend only among the men of that time, but still descends and is present today. For behold, I am with you all days until the end of the world'. I could go on and on with quotations of this kind, from the one in St Mark's Liturgy:

'Lord... Physician of souls and bodies, visit us and heal us', to an ancient Christian inscription: 'Please, Lord, come to my aid, you alone are a physician'.

This is not to foment contempt for medicine or science. The opposite is true: it is almost impossible to have a history of medicine without reference to the Church. Regardless of the charisma of performing 'miracles', Christianity has always supported the development of the 'power' to heal, with all the means of intelligence and skill, material and spiritual, of which the Lord has made the creature capable, endowing it with an intelligent soul, which knows how to invent appropriate techniques. The Church has never abandoned the utopia of total healing as of full salvation. And it seems to me appropriate to emphasise that the frontier of the symbolic unity of being healed and being redeemed is also a humanistic garrison: it is to say that we must cherish even that which we cannot heal, to keep alive our hope in the liberation from evil promised by God in the resurrection of Jesus. God has destined humanity and the world for the fullness of life: mutual care of our vulnerability is how we become worthy of it.

For Christians, caring for the wounds of the body has never been divorced from faith in the resurrection of the flesh. This is a mystery of hope for the totality of the human condition that is too little reflected upon and should, in my opinion, be recovered and preached with greater boldness. Not separating the care of the body from that of the spirit is the sovereign condition of a total humanism that honours the dignity of the real person. Healing does not end in technique, nor in a pure ethics of duty. It requires the horizon of love in which the sick become brothers and sisters on whom to pour not only their technical-scientific skills but also their passion for their healing. All too often the doctor, the nurse, the priest, the relatives, stand before the sick person, strangers to his weakness. To the indispensable scientific professionalism must be added the audacity of love. Unfortunately, this is a dimension that seems to fade in contemporary society. And often also in Christian communities. Yet the history of the Church is full of thaumaturge saints. I believe it is urgent, even in the Church, to recover a spirituality of healing.

It is love that drives one to bend towards the weak, the sick, the excluded, the destitute, the poor, because it is an inner energy that always flows into the Other. It never allows us to close in on ourselves, because it is always 'beyond'. It is the true energy of freedom. It compels those who welcome it to go beyond themselves and their group, beyond religious affiliation itself. This is evident from the Gospel page of Matthew 25, which Cardinal Martini liked to call the 'Gospel of the non-believers' (Jesus often brings in people who are strangers to Jewish religiosity, sometimes even enemies). The evangelist explicitly writes that the one who offers the glass of water is a non-believer; yet he himself, while professing before God that he is a non-believer, is heard to repeat: 'What you did to one of the least of these brothers of mine you did to me'. In this 'via amoris' we can all find ourselves, believers in God and religious believers only, lay believers and non-believers at all. Obviously, we do not find ourselves by chance, but by choice; and it is a choice that is sometimes demanding, never banal. The instinct (how can one trust it?) is to go straight down one's own path, that of individualism: and there are always a great many 'priests and Levites' who see and move on; few, too few, the Samaritans who see, are moved and stop. Love (even and especially love for the poor) is a choice that leads one to look at the sky above and not the walls below. For this reason, the agape we learn from God inhabits every gesture of love, and even its limits of power and its debts of justice: because the holding of faith, here, means that we are not willing to let go of our attachment to the wounded love of the other, and to the justice of his or her redemption, not even in the face of death. Nor even afterwards. This love, in the Christian view, is not a mystical furnishing of sentiment. And the faith that is committed to its truth does not cultivate any conceit or contempt for the reason of the human, untamable and yet vulnerable life in which we dwell together.

I would like to conclude with the statements of an Italian writer, Ennio Flaiano, a 'layman', who had a daughter, Luisa, suffering from an epileptoid encephalopathy. Lovingly cared for by her parents, Luisa died in 1992. . This writer, in the 1960s, had planned a film-romance of which only an outline remains. In it he imagines Jesus' return to earth, annoyed by journalists and photoreporters, but with him only caring for the sick. Flaiano writes at one point: 'a man brought his sick daughter to Jesus and told him: I don't want you to heal her but to love her. Jesus kissed the girl and said: Truly, this man has asked for what I can truly give. So saying, he disappeared in a glory of light, leaving the crowd to comment on his miracles and the journalists to describe them'.