

Input on Catholic Theology to the workshop:

## **BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND PASTORAL CARE**

Marlène Inauen, Hospital Chaplaincy Triemli, Zurich, Switzerland

Within the Roman Catholic tradition there are stories about two saints from the thirteenth century: St. Francis, often called 'another Christ' and his beloved disciple, St. Clare, both from Assisi, Italy, living in joyous poverty, she in a convent as a nun.

One story about Clare tells us, that she did not remain in her convent, when she heard that an army was approaching her native town to destroy it. She went out marching in the direction of the enemy to pray. She took with her a *Monstrance*, a golden vessel containing the *host*, which for us is the Body of Christ remaining present in the bread after the Mass, often adored by the faithful in veneration and silence.

Elevating the monstrance with the presence of Christ, she prayed for her town to be saved from the enemy. The miracle happened indeed and Assisi remained in peace.

### **The theology behind this story –related to Pastoral Care- is for me twofold**

Sometimes we see *patients* who are as immobile, as much depending on others, as helpless as the Body of Christ in the Monstrance.

I think of two patients I visit regularly:

A lady of 63 years who contracted polio, leaving her paralysed, living at the hospital for 50 years, having painted and contributed to three autobiographic books - full of humour - to defend the value of life during the discussions of the last years.

I also think of a young man whom I visit every week at home. He was paralysed by a virus one night at the age of 14 years. For six months, we all hoped he would recover, but he remained entirely dependent on a respirator and the help of others for every thing. But by moving the mouse with his head for working on his computer, he finished college with good grades and now studies law at the University of Zurich.

Both patients - and other patients in a less extreme way - live an existence of immobility, vulnerability, dependency on others, which is so much in contrast with the emphases on efficiency, productivity, ...evident in our society today.

Could it be that they resemble in a way the host exposed in the Monstrance, the silent presence of Christ?

And like Him, by the offering of their lives - do they not contribute to more attention, care and love for all around them?

Perhaps they are prophetic signs also to our society and help us all in a invisible way to be saved from more aggression and violence - like once the people of Assisi?

Maybe the story tells us also something about our *attitude as spiritual caregivers?*

It seems to me that for us Catholics, it should be easier to be silent at a bed, when we find no words...to rely on the strength of prayer and contemplation for difficult situations - thus to be freer from expecting success from our activity. Perhaps we do not rely enough on the strength

of the *word* of God... our Protestant colleagues are often better in that, and also in preaching. However we can offer doing *nothing* - something that other professions in the hospital cannot offer (they are paid for *doing* something, fighting the illness).

We can offer a solidarity with the suffering, being with them in the darkness of Holy Saturday awaiting the morning of Easter with them...or *for* them...expressing like that something of the 'gratuity' of God's grace...

Maybe, the story confirms to us, that we are the most efficient not in activity - but in being the 'presence of God'...

### **How does Theology influence the Organization of Pastoral Care?**

The story of Claire and the Monstrance and the strength of peace flowing from the host, the Body of Christ, shows also the importance of the visible in our Catholic tradition, the importance of signs and symbols, pointing to the invisible, the Divine - the importance of sacraments and rituals in our lives.

For a long time, the priest was the only one responsible for them, the one who represented Christ.

With the theology of Vatican II, giving the original importance to baptism, the sense of the common priesthood of all the baptised was developed: as one of the consequences lay people can bring communion now to sick people, lead funeral services and so on.

Still it seems to me, that in our catholic tradition, there is a different representation for a priest and a lay spiritual caregiver.

I can see this with the two priests of my team – they are perceived more in a clear role, especially by elderly people – very soon they have the confidence of the patient – by their role, without much effort as a person - meanwhile we as lay persons have to introduce ourselves, to enter in a dialogue offering our person, that the patient may get to know what we believe, what we think, who we are...

The two representations have their (dis-)advantages:

Being more fixed – the role of the priest may be more limited, when a patient does not want to enter at all with someone of the church.

Being more open for interpretation – our role may adopt easily some paths the patient knows well – and we can be more

- a theologian to discuss religious questions with him/her,
- a confident, offering compassion, silence and listening
- or a helper in opening spiritual dimensions in a common search without any fear of the patient to be wrong.

Lay chaplains, often women, have developed this field, where they *can* work: being formed and careful in listening and creative in finding signs and rituals, close to the needs of people. They serve, e.g. with families, relatives around the bed: in helping to communicate in difficult situations, in saying goodbye for a dying person. They find new ways in surrounding people in grief, sharing with them in groups every month or inviting them to a memorial celebration on All Saints day in the hospital. Or they are close to the pain of mothers: They create a liturgy helping to overcome the loss of an unborn baby or by giving an invitation to a requiem for them in a city church...The field is wide where people in need can be met.

When both, priests and lay people, are respected in their roles, I think both will enrich each other's and the sharing become very fruitful.