

**Retreat for Carers in Mental Health
Douai Abbey 30th – 2nd June 2014**

Talk 5 – Prayer in the life of the one who lives with Mental Health difficulties

I have already made reference to the issue of the religious experience of those suffering with mental health issues. There are some dangers, especially in the case of psychoses and some neuroses, when it comes to religious experience. The schizophrenic, for instance, may have difficulties distinguishing the authentic experience of God's love with something altogether different. The community of the Church has centuries of experience with those who live with the cross of scruples. This is, I suggest, a form of neurosis, rendering prayer very difficult indeed. There was a priest many years ago who could not get through Mass for fear that he had pronounced a word incorrectly, or missed something out. I knew the priest who was tasked, as a young curate, with helping him get through Mass. For the priest with scruples, it was debilitating, embarrassing and deeply damaging to his life of prayer.

The one suffering from dementia may, perhaps, begin to forget prayers they once knew so well – although it is probably the case that the 'Our Father' and 'Hail Mary' will remain for much longer. Making the Sign of the Cross, for instance, can become confusing as motor skills begin to fade.

The one who is deeply stressed, or perhaps suffering from depression, might wonder why prayers are not answered or believe that they are in such a dark place that God would not want to be bothered with them.

All these situations call for healing at many levels and both guidance and patience from someone who can assist in such situations. Indeed, it might be suggested that there is an increasing demand for prayer guides and spiritual directors especially qualified to walk with people in these situations.

However, we must remember always that the human person is, by nature, intended for a life lived in the love that exists in God and, ultimately, will find fulfilment only in God. We are, as I have said on a number of occasions to those in the military, 'hard-wired' for God. This is especially evident, of course, in the life of the Christian, called into that relationship in the Trinity through Baptism.

“The presence of the Spirit gives Christians a certain connaturality with divine realities, and a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively, even when they lack the wherewithal to give them precise expression.”¹

This is a very hopeful statement in our context – the thought that something can happen at an intuitive level when a more external expression is lacking. Even when all ability to communicate is lacking, the “Spirit expresses our plea in a way that can never be put into words.”² I am sure St. Paul's words apply in the context of mental health challenges, for we must never be tempted to tie down the work of the Holy Spirit!

Popular Piety

Living through the liturgical changes that followed the Second Vatican Council was not easy for everyone. The Council Fathers called for a “noble simplicity” in the Liturgy.³ In some cases, the

¹ EG, n.119.

² 1 Cor. 8:26.

³ VATICAN II, *Constitution Sacrosanctum Concilium on the Sacred Liturgy*, n.34.

accent was placed on the simplification and our churches became much plainer buildings than had been the case in the past. It might be fair to say that the church in this country went through a phase during which many externals of liturgy and prayer were stripped away – the best of these are now rediscovered. Statues disappeared (in some cases, good taste may have suggested that this was a good idea), but were not always replaced. A number of the devotions of the Church disappeared from view altogether – some have now reappeared as part of our regular devotional life.

It was, therefore, interesting to find Pope Francis addressing the topic of popular piety, in the context of evangelisation. He examines this topic from a cultural perspective. He quotes Pope St. John Paul II when he said:

“Being human means ‘being at the same time son and father of the culture to which one belongs’.”⁴

This recognition that our life of piety is informed by our culture and the fact that the way we pray and express our faith will be handed down within our culture is important when we are assisting those for whom prayer and their very relationship with God is difficult.

There is something of a warning here for us. If we, perhaps born at a different age to those for whom we care (whichever direction that generational difference may go), forget or discourage the culture of prayer and piety in which they are inculturated, the life of prayer may well be closed off to them.

Quoting Pope Paul VI in his Encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope Francis states the following:

“Popular piety manifests a thirst for God which only the poor and the simple can know’...Closer to our own time, Benedict XVI...pointed out that popular piety is ‘a precious treasure of the Catholic Church.’”⁵

Such piety, different in different cultures, is recognised as a perfectly valid and appropriate way to express the life of faith. Pope Francis states:

“To understand this reality we need to approach it with the gaze of the Good Shepherd, who seeks not to judge but to love...I think of the steadfast faith of those mothers tending their sick children who, though perhaps barely familiar with the articles of the creed, cling to a rosary; of all the hope poured into a candle lighted in a humble home with a prayer for help from Mary, or in the gaze of tender love directed to Christ crucified.”⁶

We can be very judgemental when it comes to religious practice. We live in a society where outward expressions of Faith are often misunderstood – again, we need to be counter-cultural and to facilitate simple prayer for those who seek a relationship with Christ. This may be very difficult in some settings, where the silent, unuttered prayer of the one who cannot easily express themselves will be heard by the Father. Such may be the expressions of prayer for those in our care and we need to encourage ways of prayer that will be real and will bring healing and peace. This may take a very long time, for there may be difficulties – arising from illness – that will have to be overcome. Indeed, it may be necessary to observe the signs of the times and step in at just the right moment to

⁴ EG, n.122.

⁵ EG, n.123.

⁶ EG, n.125.

re-introduce someone to prayer at the moment in their path of recovery when it is possible and right for them to pray again. This will demand great discernment.

It will always be important for us to be open to expressions of prayer as they arise – and perhaps direct a little at times. Such expressions of prayer are, the Holy Father reminds us, “the work of the Holy Spirit.”⁷

“Expressions of popular piety have much to teach us; for those who are capable of reading them, they are a *locus theologicus* which demands our attention, especially at a time when we are looking to the new evangelisation.”⁸

It is clear from the Encyclical that the Holy Father situates his words on this subject in the context of Evangelisation. But, to return to the theme of Dialogue, should we not be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in those for whom we care. As I have said, a little guidance in the right direction may well be needed, to ensure that the experience of prayer is authentic and that it will be fruitful for all concerned. This will demand discernment for carers and companions – but we must be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in all those in our care, for each one of them is the presence of Christ for us.

⁷ EG, n.126.

⁸ loc.cit.