
SPIRITUAL AND PASTORAL CARE INSIDE FAMILY

- Talking about “spiritual and pastoral care inside family”
for me as Chaplain of a big University Hospital
mainly relates with situations of dying and death.
- For that, I would like to focus on these,
my familiar moments, days, hours in assisting and attending families.
- I hope to do so with your kindly permission.

THE IMPACT OF THE SOCIAL NETWORK IN TIMES OF CRISIS

- Religion is humanity's oldest system of trauma care.
- This is an understanding I have gained from my many years of active participation in the field of Psychotraumatology.
- Well, being old or dying by itself should not be a traumatic situation, but as the last period and the natural end-point of our earthly life, it evokes fear and other intense emotions.
- Many times, people are scared of this time; the dying person as well as the people that form their social context: Because, the reality of what may or may not be beyond is not accessible to our direct experience.
- In fact, death and the “hereafter” forever have been subject of faith and hope.
- At the threshold of death, the *concept of self and the world* formed by the individual must be proven as stable.
This is similar to other existentially burdening or traumatic crises.

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- Today we know that the successful passing through such times of crisis always vitally depends on this *concept of self and the world* which we indicate as the spiritual dimension of human life.
 - Convictions, experiences and desire carry this dimension of life and survival and form the foundation of our identity and our basic feeling of security.
 - But for the individual who finds him/herself in a highly straining and fearful situation, this personal foundation of life often appears not to be sufficient and strong enough; or when dementia or other diseases combined with altered states of consciousness constrict the access to the individual's *concept of self and the world*.
 - This is precisely when community, the social dimension and social connections come to aid.
 - The Philosopher Martin Buber expressed this in his well-known phrase: "The human being is formed "I" by the "You". The religions, meant as cultures of spirituality and common religiosity, forever have granted this truth structure and stability, mediated by family, neighborhood and clan.
 - When an individual's *concept of self and the world* reaches its limit, Religion connects the individual – his convictions and experiences – with those of the community.

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- Even more:
Religion connects the individual
also with the convictions and experiences of the forefathers and foremothers:
as Moses was told to motivate his people
to swap the security of Egypt with the ambiguity of the desert:
“The God of your fathers has sent me to you... the God of Abraham, of
Isaac, and of Jacob” (Ex 3)
 - Especially at the time of dying,
a time of transition into an absolutely unknown future,
the credibility offered by social relationships and Religion
has always held central importance:
 - To be part of a community means
being a part of a shared meaning, a shared *concept of self and the world*,
and possessing a treasure of common rituals.
This community through its actions, symbols and words
helps to actualize together and renew
meaning and trust in life's foundations
when it is most necessary.

THE CONCEPT OF FAMILY IN A CHANGING WORLD

- Since the subject of this presentation is “Family”,
I think it is necessary to understand this word as multidimensional.
~~We need to go beyond the biological nuclear family
of father, mother, and child
and expand the concept to more
than the sociological network of blood relationships
and the various generations.~~

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- Cultural sciences today teach us that the concept of family is understood differently in every culture of the world including concepts such as family of origin, nuclear family, extended family, extended blood or tribal family, actual community of life, people of one's own race or ethnicity, and also more and more one's own “circle of best friends”.
 - Theology, too, gives us a different concept of “family by faith” founded by baptism and therefore somehow separate and distinct from the family of birth.
 - In any case, ~~no matter what concept of family one subscribes to,~~ family in all cultures is regarded a very important system of survival in times of crises. Family steps in and offers the much needed credibility and stability of the foundational *concepts of self and the world*.
 - In a world, that gives more importance to the individual as ever before and in a world of profound cultural changes, the term of family and the importance of family will be uniquely different for each individual.
 - Especially in the industrial countries the concept of the so called “patchwork family” or the concept of the “family of friends” is growing.
 - An inherent challenge with these new family concepts is that often in times of crisis there is no common *concept of self and the world*.

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- Frequently, those families also lack commonly held and practiced rituals to actualize it.
 - While these kinds of family offer social support, compassion, and practical help, often it has lost the function of implicit and explicit coherence of meaning and hope.

- **SPIRITUAL CARE OF THE SICK AND THE DYING BY FAMILY**

- However family is defined, it should offer a compassionate, meaning-instilling community not only for the dying individual.
- Spoken from the perspective of faith, in the context of the family God's promise of unconditional love and eternal life is concretized and comes alive.
- When faced with impending death and an unknown future, the dying individual needs to experience through his loved ones that their hope and faith are real, trustworthy, and stable.
- This happens by being present together, by carrying the burden of the struggle together, and also by searching for meaning and value together.
- It also happens by remembering the various expressions of faith that have been significant for the individual since childhood, such as symbols, songs, lyrics and prayers. Especially for the elderly and those who deal with dementia, this search for something that they remember, and thus "own", can be a profound support on their journey to complete life.

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- Moreover, for the caring family, the common remembrance of expressions of faith can become an experience of re-connection and new way of communication with their beloved ones, a feeling that for many has been lost during the process of disease.
 - When faced with impending death and an unknown future, spiritual care of the individual by the family takes on special importance in the actions of *letting go* and *releasing/sending forth*.
And for the dying this time holds the special meaning of handing over life (bios) and responsibility. Remember the story of Jacob and his father's blessing (Gen 27). It's not about the transfer of material property but about the empowerment to live one's own adult life into the future, which is as important for sons and daughters, as it is for mothers and fathers.
 - ~~When faced with impending death and an unknown future,~~ the individual who fifty years ago promised their partner a life together in commitment and love, at the end of life needs to perform the actions of *letting go* and *releasing/sending forth*.

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- ~~When faced with impending death and an unknown future,~~
the individual who was bound to someone in love,
needs a possibility to express this love and gratefulness;
a good word or a sign to give as a blessing
to the one who begins their journey
or as a gift to those staying behind.
 - At the same time, the moments of impending death and dying
offer a time for reconciliation and a celebration of life's achievements.
It's the last and urgent time to gather, reunite, celebrate, and forgive.
 - ~~In my German culture today,~~
~~many families have lost the practice~~
~~of living together through this last lifetime up to death and dying,~~
~~and therefore many families these days~~
~~experience a sense of being lost and uncertain.~~
This is why good pastoral care for these families is important and helpful.
Like a "Master of Ceremonies",
the pastoral care provider can guide the dying and the family
through the challenges of this time.

- IMPORTANCE OF PASTORAL CARE FOR FAMILIES

- The end of life rituals of the church
for a long time have been narrowly seen
as a process only between the priest and the dying person.
- Today we need a ritual that helps to embrace also the family members
and facilitates their process of *letting go* and *releasing/sending forth*.
- ~~We need rituals that embrace the family and assist family members~~
not only with spoken prayers

but also with symbolic, ritual acts, done together,
which are more profound and effective in this final situation than words.

- We need to provide signs and symbols
to help people to *let go* and *release/send forth* the other with all their heart,
even when the intellect may not quite be ready to do so.
- At least in Europe
the Religions are no longer the common home for all people.
Pastoral care should be able
to connect people with different cultural backgrounds and beliefs
as well as people without any religious experience
who all find themselves standing around the bed of a dying family member.
This is the challenge of pastoral care today
to offer our spiritual and religious experience
to a very diverse and often unchurched population
without losing our own identity of faith.
- To help families in their challenge of spiritual care not only at the end of life,
the church must give them pastoral care workers,
who are able to do more than to read the book of rites.
- Evangelization means to open a space for the deep spiritual experience
that life is in the hand of God.
End of life situations lend themselves as very challenging
but profoundly grace-filled moments
for that type of lived Evangelization.
- A pastoral worker today needs
a caring understanding of the concrete situation,
the ability to use traditional words and signs in a way
that involves those who are present,

the dying as well as the family.

For that we have to re-discover our old traditions
and to fill them with new life.

- We also have to develop and provide new rituals and signs that can adequately and meaningfully be used in NEW challenging situations such as Intensive Care Units, Dementia and Alzheimer's Care Units or Vegetative State and Coma Care Units, and in other changing circumstances of life.
- In this way Religion can newly proof itself as humanity's oldest system of trauma care and our church can help families to live this challenging time together as also a rich time of the experience of community, meaning, promise, grace and hope.

Thank you for your kindly attention!