Reflection for World Day of the Sick, February 11, 2009

The Eucharist as Communion

In the whole area of bioethics, perhaps nothing is as important as our response to people who are sick and suffering. In his message for the World Day of the Sick on February 11, 2008, the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, Pope Benedict XVI told us that pastoral care in health must draw its spiritual strength from the Eucharist. At that point the Eucharistic conference was about to be held in Quebec, and the Pope reminded us that the Eucharist is the gift whereby the Son of God gathers all of us round his table, “…provoking in his disciples loving care for the suffering and the sick, in whom the Christian community recognizes the face of its Lord.” He emphasized that the Eucharist not only helps us help others to endure their suffering, it also helps us understand the salvific value of that suffering.

On receiving the bread and body of Christ, we are called to become with Him, in the Pope’s words, as “…bread that is broken for others”. Communion is not a passive gift, meant only for our own edification. Rather, Pope Benedict is telling us that a fuller sense of Eucharist, indeed the very meaning of “communion”, encourages us to BE bread that is broken for others, even as at the same time the true living bread nourishes us individually. The sick often understand this in a deep way. They offer their brokenness, pain and suffering, sometimes together with their anger and frustration at their condition, as “bread broken for others”. They hope and trust that we will respond in our own brokenness to their offer of communion, and that we will come to their aid. The Prayer for Christian Unity in January 2009 reminds us: “… the language of crying out to God in pain or in anger can be an expression of a deep and faithful relationship with God.” This is reassuring for us when we seemingly must progress through many different stages in dealing with chronic, life-threatening or terminal illness. This progression is most often the way we deal with other crises in life. Many of us experience times of anger and frustration in our personal relationships. While we sometimes fear that these feelings and experiences are not very “Christian”, we should simply recognize that this is how human nature works. While these feelings are usually normal, human reactions, the way in which we respond to them reveals whether or not our values are Christian. We know that honest resolution of these feelings, while the process is sometimes difficult and painful, can serve the overall good of the relationship by helping us to face some parts of ourselves that we would rather remain hidden or unadmitted.

Any anger and frustration that the sick may demonstrate should not surprise us. Rather, as caregivers and friends, we realize that it can be a good thing that these emotions are expressed: in listening beyond the outbursts, we can help our patients and loved ones articulate their real needs, which we can then help them fulfill. Ill people are no more emotional saints than the rest of us, and the Pope’s urging them to become “bread that is broken for others” is not purely symbolic. It is a recognition of the deep hurt in body, mind and spirit that many of us experience in illness, but which in God’s mysterious ways can be salvific for ourselves and others. In Section 31 of his encyclical Deus Caritas Est, Benedict XVI said of those who care for the sick: “…while professional competency is a primary fundamental requirement, it is not of itself sufficient. We are dealing with human beings and human beings always need something more than technically proper care. They need
humanity. They need heartfelt concern.” We know that this is so. All of us, not just the sick and those working in health care, need ongoing “formation of the heart.” Every time we receive the Eucharist in an attitude of openness to that formation, we become more open to the call to see ourselves as “bread that is broken for others”. The special day allocated to the World Day of the Sick is an opportunity for all of us to realize the relational implications of the Eucharist. The sick will offer themselves in their illness as “bread that is broken”, and we will reciprocate their salvific gift by helping them heal, in body and mind if possible, but, more importantly, in spirit.

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