

## Care for the sick as a “Missio Dei”

In many places around the world, missionaries dedicate themselves to caring for the sick, often in very precarious situations. Many religious sisters and brothers went especially to the so-called "mission countries" to continue the caring work of Jesus and thereby really give a very concrete interpretation and radiation of the Gospel message. Today this healing work is continued by their local fellow sisters and brothers and they experience this as a "missio dei", as pure imitation of Jesus Christ. So, we want to highlight the theme of "missio dei" from this angle, because it is a mission for those many who work for the sick that is more than mere care of the sick. It is in imitation of Jesus and like Jesus being close to the sick fellow man and doing so in his name and bringing Himself to the sick person.

### 1. Jesus savior and healer

Jesus was not a physician, but He healed many people. For a healing power emanated from Him. Above all, He had come to earth to accomplish, continue and provisionally complete the works of God in the world and in the lives of those in need of salvation. "Provisionally complete," for the final completion is yet to come at the end of time, when God will "reconcile all beings in heaven and on earth through Him" (Col. 1:20).

This introductory reflection says a great deal about, on the one hand, the direction Jesus can give to our reflection on caring for the sick, but it also sets certain limits. No, we cannot simply take Jesus as a model of our care for the sick without nuance. Of course, He remains the all-encompassing model for our lives and for all areas of our lives, thus also for our care of our sick fellow man, but we cannot simply adopt the way he approaches and heals the sick. For that we are missing something fundamental: we are only human, not God! With Jesus, we must always see his healing power from his God- and human-ness. As God, He is concerned for the redemption of man, and first of all for the redemption from the yoke of sin that weighs on

man; as man, like God Himself, He has real compassion for man's suffering. For God teaches us already in the Old Testament and this also becomes so visible and tangible in Jesus, that He is a God who is merciful who shows his mercy through His compassion for those who suffer and His forgiveness to those who sin and want to repent. It is this mercy that we, as the image of God, have inherited in our genes, so to speak, so that we as human beings can be merciful, or at least be called to be merciful, as God is merciful. It is, in other words, a well-known encouragement given to us by Jesus: "*Be merciful, as your Father in heaven is merciful*" (Lk. 6:36).

### John's question

To get a summary picture of Jesus' mission, we listen to the answer He gives to the question posed to Him by John's disciples, "*Are You who would come, or do we have another to expect?*" (Mt. 11:3). Jesus does not answer directly but refers to what He is doing, which should be clear to John that He is indeed the One who was to come. It is an answer that at first glance is bulging with healings, and the danger is that we see them only as an act of the particular "man" Jesus as He is reduced by some. "*Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind see again and the lame walk, lepers become clean and the deaf hear, the dead rise, and to the poor the good news is proclaimed*" (Mt. 11:4-5). It is surprising that Jesus does not talk about the message He preaches, but only about the works He performs. This may mislead us and indeed see Him as the great Healer, the Physician par excellence. But on closer inspection, He is not talking about healing the sick, but rather about the radical change that takes place in people through His intervention, which cannot actually be obtained through mere human action. They are all miracles that He lists here, with a final plea for justice in the world where the poor are no longer oppressed. If this last one may seem out of place for a moment, we know by now how difficult it is for people to arrive at this

justice; here too a miracle of radical reversal is needed.

So, we can say that in all of His action as man here on earth, His deity shines through. He never acts as mere man, but as God who has appeared among men as man. With His actions He does indeed intervene in man in his earthly condition, but every action actually transcends this earthly condition. Something of the heavenly is revealed each time, where the blind will see and the lame walk, where all leprosy will be gone and where the deaf will hear and where only justice will be done. Jesus might as well have answered, "I have come to bring the Kingdom of God on earth." No, He will say that later, and even say that He is indeed King, but not of this world (cfr. Jn. 18:36). The message He conveys through the disciples to John actually refers to the prophet He Himself quoted at His first appearance in Nazareth. A prophet like John should be given a prophetic response. So John must have made the connection immediately as Jesus Himself made the connection during His first "homily": *"He opened the scroll and found the place where it is written, 'The Spirit of the Lord rests on me; for this purpose He has anointed me. To bring the good news to the poor he has sent me, to announce to prisoners their release and to the blind the light in their eyes, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year pleasing to the Lord'"* (Lk. 4:17-19).

All the healing stories we encounter in the Gospels will have to be seen against the background of this general mission statement. It is always more than healing; with each healing the way to the Kingdom of God is opened. Thus, it is striking that almost always the forgiveness of sins precedes the physical healing. But that does not take away from the fact that in the healings we also find clear indications of how we should deal with illness and suffering. So we can learn something from Jesus in his dealings with the sick. We would therefore like to dwell on some pericopes from the Gospel.

### **Jesus heals as part of his total redemption**

*"He crossed by boat and came into His city. There they brought to Him a paralytic who was lying on a bed. Seeing their confidence, Jesus said to the paralytic, 'Rest assured, friend, your*

*sins are forgiven you'"* (Mt. 9:1-2). We know the reaction of the scribes after this forgiveness of sins by Jesus: *"That man blasphemes God"* (Mt. 9:3). It is significant that Jesus forgives sins in a first move, manifesting his deity, because the scribes are right: only God can forgive sins. At the same time, by prioritizing the forgiveness of sins, Jesus shows the importance of restoring one's relationship with God that must come before everything else. True healing of a person can break through only when he is first reconciled to God and in the right. It is at the same time, as already indicated, a letting the Kingdom of God breakthrough in this person's life. That is Jesus' first movement: He came to earth to announce salvation and also to accomplish it. Every action of Jesus toward fellow human beings during his public appearance is a radiation or foreshadowing of this. He also indicates with it what is most important in life: a renewed relationship with God that will bear its beneficent fruit to the other relationships: the relationship with ourselves, with our fellow men, with all creation. We are urged to let our caring and healing actions toward fellow human beings also always be guided by focusing it on that wider perspective of redemption and seeing it as part of redemption. We must continue, as it were, the redemptive work of Jesus on earth, but then we must also see it in priority as an act of redemption and not reduce it as merely caring for and healing the sick body.

The story continues with the effective physical healing of the paralytic. *"But that you may know that the Son of Man is competent to forgive sins on earth, then He said to the paralytic, 'Get up, take up your bed and go home'"* (Mt. 9:6). We are struck by the three words: get up, take up your bed and go home.

The first word indicates immediate healing. The paralytic gains strength in his legs and can stand upright again. The physical healing takes place which is like a consequence of the moral healing. A person who is morally healed gains the strength to move forward in life again. It is the inner strength that is invoked in the paralyzed to manifest itself physically as well. When one no longer sees things in life, one sits down or even lies down and refuses to move anymore. When one finds new perspective in life, one gains the strength to move again.

Pick up your bed: the paralytic is urged to pick up his bed and carry it with him. No, he may not leave his history behind, but it is from this history that he must now live on. No one is ever cured forever. One heals partially and continues to carry many imperfections. In every life there will always be moments of suffering, but we are called to walk with them, to live with them, without letting them paralyze us.

Go home: the paraplegic is asked to reintegrate himself into society. It truly becomes a holistic healing: he is physically delivered from his paralysis, he is psychologically strengthened to accept his life situation, and he is socially brought back into the community. And all from what precedes: the restoration of the relationship with God through the forgiveness of sins.

Holism is a word that sounds modern. But unfortunately, it is often an unattainable ideal that hardly seems to be realized in healthcare. In the 1970s, there was a lot of talk about integrated nursing, the idea being to pay attention to all dimensions of the patient's life during care, rather than limiting it to a purely physical-technical act. Has this dream of integrated care gone up in smoke? Indeed, we often have to conclude that healthcare has become so medico-technical that there is hardly any room left to deal with people multidimensionally. However, this often does not require an extra effort, but an extra attention. From Jesus we learn how we can bring the Kingdom of God on earth by always seeing the human being first and foremost as the image of God and in our further actions meeting Jesus himself in our fellow man. We are called to develop our care from a pastoral basic attitude. This is completely different from how we now often interpret pastoral care as something totally separate and only relevant when the opportunity presents itself. With Jesus, this was the starting point and basic attitude that determined and directed everything else.

I want to end here with an example from life. During the covid pandemic, I was hit by the virus and ended up in the hospital. Things were very technical, with all the precautions of isolation. For example, meals were dropped off at the door and we had to pick them up ourselves, minimizing contact with the staff. One morning it sounded at the door,

"Breakfast," so we understood that the food was ready. The next morning, however, it sounded different: "Good morning, slept well? Your breakfast is at the door. Bon appetit." What a difference in approach, but what an effect on our psychic disposition when we really felt addressed as human beings. Breakfast tasted so much better because we had felt something of redemption welling up within us. We were more than a number, we were a human being, a fellow human being, a child of God. Those few words spoken in a friendly tone made all the difference!

### **Healing of Peter's mother-in-law**

We take one healing story that gives us a beautiful picture of Jesus' concern for the welfare of fellow man. Just as Jesus was fully committed to his Father, he was likewise fully committed to his fellow man. This is already a first observation: the totality with which He turns toward His fellow man. Every physical distance is eliminated and a very close personal relationship is established with the person whom Jesus meets. It is as if only this person counts: he or she receives his full attention and his total concern goes out to him or her.

We take a brief walk through the story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. Jesus arrives at Simon's home after a teaching in the synagogue. Immediately He is confronted with a distress there and the bystanders call for His help. *"Since Simon's mother-in-law was prey to a high fever, they called for his help for her"* (Lk. 4:38). Jesus is fully attentive to the concrete life situation of the person who passes his way. He is totally there for that one person, with a deep sympathy, openness, interest, which will develop into an equally deep mercy. It is from this mercy that healing can arise. *"Jesus gave a stern command to the fever. She was delivered from it, and immediately she arose and served them"* (Lk. 4:39).

Today I am that person to whom Jesus gives His full attention and stands ready to bestow His mercy and healing. Do I feel this compassionate, merciful attention of Jesus in my hurting existence and hear Him speak His healing and forgiving words to me? Only with Him can I obtain true healing, forgiveness, complete healing of all my wounds. In Jesus I feel fully restored and like Peter's mother-in-law

I can begin to minister to others. For the sympathy and mercy that I may receive from Jesus, I must also show myself to those who pass on my way. And then it is about that very concrete fellow human being, who needs my help, whether asked or unasked. To him my sympathy and mercy must go out. Every day I get countless opportunities to become the neighbor of him or her whom I meet, whether by chance or not. Am I for him or her like Jesus in Luke's story, am I that Good Samaritan for whom the need of a total stranger is more important than his planned journey, and do I see in that other Jesus himself? Seeing, meeting and loving Jesus in our fellow man is what makes our help for the other truly charity, *caritas*. "*All that you do for one of the least of my brothers, you have done to me*" (Mt. 25:40). Jesus himself, with his presence in fellow man, seals my love for that fellow man. It takes an effort, a daily effort to see Jesus himself in every person we meet. But only then can we say with St. Mother Teresa, "*I did it for You, I did it to You, Lord Jesus.*"

The attention, sympathy and healing mercy Jesus show for that one person is never limited to that one person. Jesus is open to everyone. It is God's love, at once very personal and universal, that Jesus radiates. Personal and universal are two words that we find difficult to place together from our purely human thinking. With God this is possible, in Jesus we see it realized, and as human beings we are called to this. Our love must always be personal and remain open to everyone without exception. That universal also refers to the willingness to always be ready with our love and not to give it only when it suits us, when it is in our schedule. "*At sunset, all those who were sick, suffering from many ailments, were brought to Him. He healed them by laying hands on them one by one*" (Lk. 4:40). Perhaps Jesus was tired from the past day and had planned to spend the evening quietly with Peter's family. Or He had anticipated spending the evening in prayer. But the people who came knocking with their need were given absolute priority. And the text explicitly says that He laid hands on them one by one. Jesus opens himself up to the masses, but will try to meet people personally there as well. With Jesus it never becomes mass work,

routine, but the personal encounter remains paramount.

Universal, yet personal: it is not opposites for Jesus. This example of Jesus is a true confrontation for all of us. How many times have we kept our door closed to the one who came knocking? And each time we may have had a legitimate excuse. Perhaps that excuse was that now was the time for our prayer. We know that Vincent de Paul was very clear about this: that *caritas* should always take priority, even if at the expense of our prayer. His argument was that we find the same Jesus we worship in the tabernacle also in the person we help with love and mercy. That became his famous "leaving God for God." Of course, it should not become an excuse not to pray, because if we do not come to know Jesus in our prayer, we will have great difficulty recognizing Him in our fellow man as well.

Jesus indeed prefers the concrete fellow man who comes knocking, He postpones His prayer for their sake, and we read how He will then consciously make time for prayer. "*When day had come, He went out and went to a solitary place*" (Lk. 4:42). His total givenness and availability to fellow man does not prevent Him from setting aside time for conversation with His Father. With Jesus, there seems to be no tension between them. For us, again, this is often problematic. How often do we complain of not having time for prayer because work demands us completely? While others withdraw into prayer, locking themselves up, as it were, in their own secure little world and becoming insensitive to the needs of their fellow man. Jesus goes with the needs of His fellow men to His Father, He dedicates them to Him. And from His prayer, He brings God's love into the world. His care for fellow man is like a reflection of God's love and mercy. We must strive in our lives for that unity between prayer and commitment, the "*ora et labora*". Mother Teresa's simple words can help us along this path: "*The fruit of silence is prayer; the fruit of prayer is faith; the fruit of faith is love; and the fruit of love is service.*" And we might add that it is from service, like Jesus, that we can enter silence, and so the circle is closed.

There is a fourth movement in the periscope, saying that Jesus does not fix himself in one place, but also wants to go to the other cities to



bring the Good News of the Kingdom of God (cfr. Lk. 4, 43-44). This will also be the ultimate message that Jesus will give to his disciples: go to all nations to proclaim to them the Good News. And the disciples will also understand this after Jesus' ascension and with the coming of the Holy Spirit: proclamation knows no bounds. In our secularized world, there is a danger that we shut ourselves away in a safe circle of like-minded people and barely let the word of the Good News ring out in the wider environment. We are afraid of being ridiculed. Pope Francis, on the other hand, constantly called us to go to the periphery and not to shut ourselves up in the sacristy. We can also apply this in our concrete care for fellow human beings. There are no limits here, and today there are many who live on the periphery and are inflamed with appropriate care. Nay, this should nor can leave us indifferent.

Four movements that guide the way we should be caring toward fellow human beings.

### **Jesus drives out the evil spirits**

We should also pay some attention here to the fact that the Gospel indicates in several places that Jesus very directly cast out devils. Some today would easily argue that it may have been mental patients who were considered to be possessed and brought to Jesus to be healed. In some place's epilepsy is explicitly mentioned, while in others it remains an open question whether it is really about someone who is possessed by the devil or was previously considered such.

However, a number of exorcism stories are very clear that it really did involve the devil possessing man. We take the story of the possessed man in the land of the Gerasene's. Here again we see the divine power that was present in Jesus and with which He was able to manifest His power over the devil. As if He wants to show us that evil never has the last word when we trustingly turn to Him.

What is striking about most of these exorcism stories and therefore what can we situate very nicely in this story?

At first, we see a man who has lost his human countenance, as it were, and at the same time possesses superhuman powers. *"Even with a chain no one could bind him anymore, no one could restrain him"* (Mk. 5:3-4). His behaviour

is aimed at self-destruction. *"Day and night, he walked among the tombs and on the mountains roaring and pounding himself with stones"* (Mk. 5:5). The devil has only one goal: to take control of man, to deprive him of his human dignity as a child of God and ultimately to plunge him into destruction. Here we see the physical effect of what evil causes in man morally. In this possessed man, what the devil has in store for man is magnified. When someone is in the grip of evil, he is totally overpowered by it and it is beyond human strength to break free from its grip. Only a force stronger than evil can bring salvation.

But then comes the confrontation with Jesus. In the Gospel, it is often the possessed who reveal the true identity of Jesus. Here too it sounds, *"What do you want of me, Jesus, Son of the most high God?"* (Mk. 5, 7). What the bystanders do not want to hear and keep denying, is presented to them by the devil. But precisely because the devil recognizes Jesus very directly as the Son of God, his reaction is also very fierce toward Him. For he recognizes in Him the one against whom he has been fighting for centuries from his insatiable pride. It does contrast with the temptation story of Jesus in the desert, where the devil asked Jesus to kneel down before him. Now it is the devil who kneels down because he knows he is the lesser in the battle. But his kneeling down is not out of reverence, but in the hope that he will be spared by Him. *"I beseech thee by God: do not hurt me"* (Mk. 5:7). Jesus had the power to destroy the devil here, but His time had not yet come. Nay, redemption will have to happen in another way by definitively breaking the absolute power of evil. At the same time, the power of evil is indicated by the word "Legion". *"For we are many"* (Mk. 5:9). But the power of Jesus is greater, and at the same time He shows here a kind of compassion towards the evil one, by responding to his request not to destroy him. We know the consequence of the story where two thousand pigs plunged into the lake and drowned. Even freed from man, evil continues to do its destructive work.

The story confronts us with the reality and presence of evil in the world and in human beings, including us. There is only one who can free us from evil, and that is the Lord. But we are expected to avoid being seized by evil in order to avoid coming totally under the

influence of evil and being totally controlled by it. The relationship between evil and sickness and suffering remains a reality because evil fundamentally disturbs our human nature and is the ultimate cause of our suffering and death. We now see the possessed man "*clothed and in his full mind*" (Mk. 5:15). With him, true healing had been accomplished through his deliverance from the power of evil. From Jesus he receives these words, "*Go home to your family and tell them what the Lord has done for you and how he has taken care of you*" (Mk. 5:19). The man is integrated back into his family, but is given the message to bear witness to God's mercy. He becomes a proclaimer of God's benefits.

Even in the expulsion of the devil, it becomes clear that Jesus is always both saviour and healer. But it is the redemption from evil that always takes place first, the physical healing being, as it were, an externalization of it. In our task of caring and healing, it is important to likewise maintain the link between redemption and healing and to see our work in healing already in the light of redemption and to entrust our healing work to the redemptive work of Jesus who is the actual healer. It makes us refer back to the book of Jesus Sirach where the healer is described precisely as the one who receives the healing power from God, "*for healing comes from the Most High*" (Sir. 38, 4).

## 2. Jesus "*ipse medicus, ipsa medicina*"

Augustine describes Jesus with the well-known statement, "*ipse medicus, ipsa medicina*": simultaneous physician and medicine. Jesus is both the savior and salvation, He brings salvation to people and at the same time is Himself the source of salvation. With the incarnation, not only is the sick person healed but the cause of the illness is also addressed. And the disease spoken of here is nothing less than pride. Augustine puts it this way: "*The cause of all disease is pride, for the cause of all sin is pride. When a physician follows a sick person, attending to the symptoms of the disease without removing its cause, the sick person seems better for a period, but the disease returns. To remove the cause of all disease, namely pride, the Son of God came to this earth and humbled Himself*" (Sermons on the Gospel of John, 25, 16).

We can now ask what this premise that Augustine puts forward has to do with caring for the sick that we want to take as the subject of our consideration. It invites us to always place our caring for the sick in a wider perspective. And that wider perspective is precisely human nature, the way human nature has been "afflicted" by the sin of pride, and how for this sin a healing perspective was offered through the redemptive work of Jesus. We remain subject to the disease of pride during this life, but we believe that a complete healing will eventually occur, a healing offered to us by Jesus, of which He is both the physician and the cure.

This reality of the presence of pride in our lives that has gripped the whole of human nature and, at the same time, the realization that pride no longer has the last word in life since redemption, casts a special perspective on our caring for fellow human beings. It deprives us, on the one hand, of the illusion that we can speak of healing only when we have eradicated the disease once and for all and of the false expectation that this can set in those we care for. But on the other hand, it also gives an additional dimension to our care that we can see in the broader light of salvation and as our human contribution to the work of redemption. We would like to briefly elaborate on these two aspects.

## Our concern will always be limited

In the medical world there is sometimes an expectation that with the further progress of science one will grow ever closer to an omnipotence with which one can master disease. Indeed, much progress has already been made, and diseases that previously seemed untreatable can now be treated and even completely cured. With the advent of antibiotics, many infections that previously led to death could be causally addressed and also permanently cured. For some infections, where a definitive cure cannot yet be offered as a prospect, such as the AIDS infection, medications have since been developed that bring the condition under control to such an extent that a virtually normal life can be led, which was unthinkable a few years ago. For cancers, more and more success is being

achieved in increasing the chances of survival with suitable therapy.

This can create the illusion that one will eventually be able to treat and completely cure any disease. It gives medicine the allure of omnipotence. But with the other side of the coin comes disappointment and even the accusation of not fulfilling the medical mission properly when treatment fails to achieve the expected cure. Physicians testify what superhuman expectations are sometimes placed upon them with the danger of being accused of not having acted carefully when the hoped-for and expected cure fails to materialize. It is as if they are only there to heal, and if they fail to do so they are not fulfilling their mission properly.

The covid pandemic, which paralyzed the entire world, naturally put a big dent in this pursuit of medical omnipotence. Very quickly one had to admit that one is not omnipotent at all and even completely impotent to be able to overpower this quasi-invisible virus in time. It was thought that such an infection would be found only in the history books, at a time when people did not have the appropriate medication or had no understanding at all of how viral infections work. Who would have thought that a kind of plague would once again sweep through the world like the Black Death and that we would have to wait so long to come up with a suitable vaccine, the efficacy of which is not even one hundred percent assured? Man's fragility has completely undermined the illusion of omnipotence.

Is it then one of the positive effects of the covid pandemic that we were forced into a greater sense of reality and that we could now refer the omnipotence of medicine to the realm of illusions for good? It is in this reality that will always continue to run into limitations that we must situate our work in healthcare. From our human capabilities, we must indeed do everything we can to prevent illness, to try to cure illness, but above all to support the sick person in his sickness. The word "heal" should no longer be translated as being able to heal absolutely, but rather as alleviating pain, increasing comfort in suffering, and further searching for appropriate therapies to cure disease or at least alleviate suffering. It is in this reality that physicians and caregivers must move and not reach for goals that are not theirs

to achieve, to avoid falling into the disillusionment of not being able to perform what they set out to do or being falsely accused of not achieving what is expected and ultimately even required of them.

Top medicine and optimal care are too often and too exclusively linked to total cure and return of optimal condition. Indeed, advertisements placed by certain private hospitals in Eastern and Southern countries to attract clients for their expensive treatments create the illusion that total healing of any ailment is guaranteed when one goes to their hospital. This, of course, is pure business, and at the same time misleading and keeps up the image of the so-called omnipotence of medicine, if only one can turn to the best doctors in the world. It would be good against each of this to place the efforts of the many health care providers who work day and night to heal the suffering of people in their sickness, but healing in the true sense of the word. Physicians would therefore be better off calling themselves healers, masters of healing who work with other health care providers to look after sick people and see with them how best to help and truly heal them, even when total healing is not possible at all. But then it is expected that these healers not only accept their own limitations but also live them in a positive way and consider not only total healing as a success but also any act that makes a person more whole in his brokenness and suffering. This will not detract from the scientific endeavour to progress further in the efforts to heal, but will make that endeavour more realistic with the acceptance of human limitation always remaining as a boundary that cannot be crossed as a perspective. A boundary that can be shifted, but can never be completely eliminated. It also requires a change in mentality among the sick who must refrain from setting unrealistic expectations before their healers and caregivers. Finally, it requires a mutual honesty in which the true nature of the illness and likely prospects for cure can be openly discussed. After all, some sick people do not tolerate their healers confronting them with reality and only desire to hear good news. When one cannot provide it immediately, they quickly turn to another, hoping that he or she will then announce the glad tidings of a possible total cure. And some healers find it beneath their

scientific status to admit that their possibilities are limited, because they refuse to admit that the limited nature of human nature cannot be tinkered with indefinitely. They continue to strive for what is too high for them: some kind of divine power to ultimately become masters of life itself and thereby be able to put off inevitable death more and more. With the vain hope that one day they would invent the elixir of life to finally master death as well. Then they could truly call themselves "god," men who could cure even the last illness, death.

### **Our care as part of and in the perspective of final redemption**

We can argue that we should also always see our caring in the light of salvation and as a participation in salvation. This ennobles our caring and healing towards fellow human beings and makes it a divine mission, a "missio dei." If we just rejected the divine power to be pursued because it is simply a repetition of what has been manifest in human nature since the beginning of humanity as a result of pride, the cause of all sin and the greatest sin, which could and can only be cured by the only true healer, Jesus Christ as the Son of God, we want to talk here about a divine mission that is indeed offered to us, namely, the healing and care of fellow human beings who are sick. And this as part of the total redemption that is offered to us beyond the limitations of our human nature as a perspective and also as a step toward this redemption. With our healing and care, we may participate in the wider redemption offered to us by Jesus. We become co-redeemers, as it were, without wanting to write redemption as such on our account. Through our healing and care, we allow the glow of final redemption to descend into the temporality of our earthly existence, and our human contribution takes on a divine dimension.

It is Jesus Christ who is the only one who has brought us salvation and offers it to each one as the ultimate new perspective of this life. From now on, our life is focused on the resurrection and no longer stops at death. Death has lost its absolute power over man and has become only a transition to the final life. Once we allow this reality to penetrate us, everything we do and experience will be coloured by it and will also be interpreted differently. Even illness and

suffering will be profoundly affected by this perspective, and the healing and care given in illness will, on the one hand, feel completely subordinate to this final healing and total healing, but, on the other hand, will also place itself on the path to this final total salvation. It is as if, through the healing and care we offer someone, we are already giving a foretaste of the final redemption. This becomes very clear when we abandon the craving for omnipotence just described to always want to heal completely but, on the contrary, continue to put all our energy into the true healing of the human being, even when every prospect of total healing is absent. True healers and caregivers also continue to give their best to these people in order to make them already now feel something of the perspective of the resurrection. They do this in imitation themselves of Jesus Christ and in their actions become, as it were, foreshadowing of the one and true Physician who is Jesus Christ and who alone can give total healing, total victory over death. They do it likewise to Jesus Christ Himself, remembering the word He communicated to them and to us that everything we do to one of the least of His brothers and sisters is done to Him (cfr. Mt. 25:40). Acting like Jesus and acting towards Jesus then becomes that totally unique interpretation of healing and caring for fellow human beings and makes this healing and caring a divine mission asked of us Christians. Perhaps herein lies the core of a Christian-inspired healing and caring and also makes all the difference. It gives to our healing and care a perspective that always extends beyond the mere healing and care we offer. We are strengthened by our faith in the resurrection when we nevertheless continue to heal and care for a sick person who no longer has any prospect of being healed with all the human capabilities we have and with an abundance of love, in order to make him or her, as already indicated, already feel the perspective of the joy of the resurrection. It always reminds me of the story where Mother Teresa in Calcutta picked up a dying person from the street and brought him to her home where he died after a few hours. But that final act of love gave him back the human dignity that he had totally lacked for so long. *"I have lived like an animal, and now I may die like an angel,"* were his last words. If





Photo from SVD International Conference on Mission at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome

that is not resurrection joy that this man was allowed to receive during the last moments of his life here on earth, a joy that would soon break through to him in full. That also indicated the sense that even for someone who no longer had any prospect of healing and who was certain to die after a few hours, we could still muster the energy to surround him with loving care. If this were to happen more in our current caregiving, perhaps many a question of euthanasia would simply never be asked. For then, through loving presence and care, the hopelessness through which suffering may be scarred regains a perspective, a perspective that extends beyond death. It is that which becomes so evident in palliative care, where healing and care has abandoned all pretence of wanting to heal yet and is only concerned with alleviating suffering as much as possible. What added value can this palliative care have when in the heart of this care the perspective of resurrection is allowed to shine. Then death is experienced as a transition to real life. It was this that Teresa of Lisieux could exclaim in her death throes, "*I am entering life.*" No, in our healing and care, we cannot expect that everyone will be able to utter that, but let us make sure that in a high-tech medical framework, attention to the human being remains intact and remains the priority. Wasn't that the tragedy experienced by many when people affected by covid infection died in intensive care without being able to say goodbye to their loved ones. The worst suffering was the enforced isolation and being surrounded only by masked caregivers who looked more like astronauts than caregivers

who, because of the high risk of infection, were no longer able to give a warm hand or a gentle caress.

Jesus is presented as the ultimate **physician and medicine**, who saves humanity from evil through his redemptive death by forgiving sins, often prioritizing spiritual healing before physical.

Beyond being the **physician**, Jesus is also the **medicine**. His divine power emanated from his body, as seen in instances where people were healed by simply touching his garment: "Wherever He went, to villages or towns or hooves, they laid the sick in the marketplace, and they asked Him to be allowed to touch at least the hem of His garment. And whoever touched Him was saved" (Mk. 6:56). Another account highlights this: "If I but touch His garments, I shall be saved. Immediately the well of her blood dried up, and she felt by her body that she was healed of her ailment. But Jesus, who Himself immediately felt that a power had emanated from Him, turned around in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?'" (Mk. 5:28-31). These passages demonstrate the substantial presence of divine power within him.

This understanding extends to today. We can pray to Jesus for healing, finding strength in the belief that he sympathizes with our suffering. He complements human medical efforts spiritually. Through the **Eucharist**, Jesus remains present as a continuous medicine, offering the same healing power that emanated from him. This is particularly emphasized in the **Viaticum**, the Eucharistic bread given to the dying.

For caregivers, it's crucial to remember Jesus' divine presence as both physician and medicine. By integrating this spiritual dimension into our care, we not only provide physical comfort but also offer Jesus himself as a remedy, becoming both physician and medicine, as St. Augustine noted. This profound perspective transforms the act of caring into a holistic experience, where faith and compassion converge to bring true solace and healing, mirroring Christ's own transformative touch in the lives of those suffering. It's a call to embrace our role as conduits of divine grace in every act of service.