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## Cancer and Spirituality

Rev. Arnaldo Pangrazzi

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*The word cancer usually means bad news for people. It takes away our security and it puts us in touch with our fears: the fear of death, the fear of recurrence, the fear of the unknown, the fear of dependence. However, there is another underlying process, maybe less tangible and traumatic, by which cancer may become good news. This process takes shape when cancer invites us to develop new priorities and a new world view and we are challenged to develop a deeper appreciation of our relationship with others, with God and with ourselves. That marks the birth of a new spirituality.*

Recently I was visiting a young man in his mid-20's who just started a chemotherapy treatment. Only a month ago cancer in his testicles was diagnosed, and only two weeks ago his wife had a miscarriage. Shortly after our introduction, he said, "I don't know why all this is happening to me. There's got to be a reason; I need to find a reason."

In the encounter with sickness, many of our securities are taken away and we begin to fear, to question, to hope. We go through a state of confusion when we try to put things back together. Actually, confusion is necessary because it allows us to gradually move from one way of viewing life and the world to another.

Indeed, suffering has the power to rapidly and deeply transform us and, at times, to destroy us. Most often, though, suffering changes our attitudes in such a way that we are almost forced to learn. Raising questions, expressing feelings, searching for meaning and purpose in what's happening are ways of shaping a new spirituality — the spirituality of the wounded, the spirituality of the beatitudes.

People who have been diagnosed with or are treated for cancer feel wounded in four major areas: their view of the world, their relationship with others, their relationship with God, their relationship to themselves. Being wounded might mean different things to different people — from being hurt to being afraid, from being out of control to being dependent, from being in pain to feeling cheated.

The sickness might also turn out to be a blessing in disguise. The same people may experience a new sense of healing in their view of the world, in their relationship with others, in their relationship to God, in their relationship to themselves.

Being healed might mean different things to different people — from being loved to being at peace, from being able to give to being able to receive, from being accepted to being involved, from being thankful to being trustful. There is a process through which people go, something like going through the darkness of Good Friday before discovering the light and hope of Easter Sunday. Both of these moments which are at the center of Christian spirituality are also at the heart of one's journey through sickness.

## A. Cancer and Our World's View

No one likes to hear those words, "You have cancer." Yet, according to statistics from the American Cancer Society, one out of every four people will have the disease. Some people have mentally prepared themselves to hear that news; others are caught completely unprepared or choose to deny it. However, such news dramatically changes our world's view.

That world's view was based on our dreams and plans, on our goals and expectations from life. Up until the time we were diagnosed with cancer, we lived in the realm of the taken-for-granted, the promise of the American dream that told us if we wanted something badly enough, we would get it. So we worked at building up our financial securities, providing a good education for our children, waiting for our

grandchildren and dreaming of travels and a happy, old age. Now all of a sudden everything is falling to pieces.

No matter what age we are — in our 20's or in our 60's — cancer has struck us too soon and it always seems unfair. The young person might complain for not being given a fair chance. The older person might complain because he was never sick before and he worked so hard for his retirement. Our reactions to having cancer and its implications for our lives vary according to our roles and responsibilities. The world's view of a mother who has a number of small children at home will be different from that of a widower or the world's view of a newly married couple. Their needs, hopes, pains and concern are of different natures. For all of them, cancer is an unwelcome guest.

Whenever it steps into their lives, it forces them to examine their expectations and formulate new priorities and new goals. In summary, cancer invites them to create a new world view.

## **B. Cancer and Our Support System**

When cancer strikes, the presence of a support system is very crucial. Our resources for support are usually the family, trusted friends, support groups, the church community. Indirectly it is our work, hobbies or interests.

Cancer is a word which instills fear in people. Very often that fear has to do with pain, disfigurement and death. A history of cancer and death in the family makes those fears more real.

There are other fears that are even more profound which threaten one's self esteem. There is the fear of isolation or abandonment. Isolation is worse than cancer. Isolation is experienced as treatment as a non-person by professionals or other people, as exclusion from conversations or decisions in the family. There is often the conspiracy of silence, when the word cancer and its implications are not discussed. Emotional energies are invested in protecting "the secret" rather than in the task of living and loving. At times, cancer patients are afraid that their condition will make them unacceptable to those around them and that people will have no time for them.

There is the fear of dependency. The more one formerly was independent, the harder it is to be dependent and to experience one's limitations. Cancer patients are afraid of becoming a burden to their families. They feel increasingly more dependent upon medications and treatments. A good rule of thumb is not to do for them the things they are capable of doing. Making decisions and doing things for themselves sustains their sense of control on life and their personal dignity.

There is the fear of separation — separation from people they love, places they treasure, dreams they have dreamt. The fear of separation

enables people to improve the quality of their time together. A couple will spend more time with each other; a mother will take more time to watch her children, knowing she will not be there forever. The possible implications of cancer affect patients' support systems as they are confronted with the idea of mortality, that they too are going to die. That can be very uncomfortable, very unsettling. As cancer patients struggle through their fears, it is important to remember that they want to be treated as human beings, not as someone with a disease. They do not want to be treated differently than before. They do not welcome gloomy or sad-looking faces around them. They do not want to be pitied. They need someone who treats them with respect and understanding, not sorrow.

At times, sending a card is an appropriate way of offering support; other times people need more. A card is not a hand, a voice or a touch. A short visit might be more appropriate than a long one when we talk patients to death. The use of cliches like: "Don't worry, you are going to be all right," "God sends us only what we can handle," "I know just how you feel," "Only the good die young" is not helpful. It is a way of dealing with our discomfort but not with patients' needs. Most people feel they have to do something in order to be helpful. They cannot deal with the discomfort of just being there, yet just being there is often the greatest comfort we can provide another human being: listening, sharing silence, holding hands, remembering together.

### C. Cancer and God

The diagnosis of cancer brings people to question the power that is in control of life. For most people that power is God. So people relate their sickness to God in different ways.

- Some people feel that they are responsible, that they have something to do with the sickness. They feel they have brought it on by smoking, by not taking care of themselves, by living constantly under stress.
- Others see sickness as God's way of punishing them for something they have done or failed to do.
- Some see sickness as God's way of testing them to see how committed they are to Him or how trustful they are of Him.
- Others see sickness as one of those things that happen: Today it's you, tomorrow it's me, and there's nothing we can do about it. We just have to put up with it.
- Some see sickness as something to be fought but which can teach them a lot about life, about themselves, about others. Sickness becomes an opportunity for growth.

The way cancer patients relate to sickness and to God might change along the way. The process of their response defines the quality of their spirituality:

- A patient might feel *let down by God*. (I've lived a good life, I've been a good person. Why does God allow this to happen to me?)
- Another one might want to *make a deal* with God. (Dear God, if you can make me well again, I am going to change my life.)
- A third one may *lose* faith in God. (I've been praying and praying but God doesn't listen to me, He doesn't care about me. I am not going to church anymore.)
- A fourth one may *find strength* in God. (I don't understand everything that is happening to me, but I try to accept it because I feel God is with me and I know He loves me.)
- A fifth one may *return to God*. (I've always been so busy, I never took time to pray or listen to God. Now, I can see how He has been with me in so many ways and my faith is getting stronger.)

#### D. Cancer and Me

I remember some comments I have heard at a support group for cancer patients. One woman said: "Sometimes I wonder why people are so neat and have cancer. But it is because they have cancer they are so neat." Another one added: "I wouldn't have learned so much about life unless I had cancer."

So cancer is a process of discovery — discovery of ourselves, discovery of life, discovery of a new world's view. Discovery of ourselves has to do with getting in touch with our feelings and the reservoir of our inner resources. Cancer puts us in touch with our fears, our limitations, our powerlessness, our humanity. We have a firsthand experience of what it means to feel vulnerable, to be mortal, to feel sad, angry, hopeful or discouraged. We learn to understand our feelings, we learn to become friends with them and utilize them to become more alive. We also learn to identify and mobilize our inner resources. To discover the power of prayer, to find strength in our faith are sources of comfort. Some people experience their faith in their search to have a more intimate experience of God; searching, for them, is a way of finding God. Others explore their hidden talents like creative writing, drawing or playing an instrument as a way to fulfill personal needs.

*Discovery of life* is reflected in our deeper awareness of life as a gift. We have a new zest for life and we take more time to love, to see, to learn, to be me. We learn to take one day at a time: if it is good we try to enjoy it; if it is rough we pray for strength to get through it. Every day is more precious. We take time to see the seasons change, the flowers blossom, the birds feeding, the sun rising. We become more

aware of the simple blessings of every day. Somehow the grass seems greener and the sky bluer than before.

The *discovery of a new world's view* is manifested in the new vision, the new hopes we bring into the world. We know what is really important, what is really at the heart of life — not money, cars or career, but life itself as a gift, you and me as a gift to each other, loving by caring, living by appreciating. We set up goals for ourselves to reach — from mending broken relationships to becoming involved in programs and activities. We develop a sense of mission that meets our need for immortality. We try to make a difference in the world, to leave our mark by embracing and sharing a vision to which we are committed. We put ourselves and our sickness at the service of others by sharing the insights, the learning and the message we feel are important for others to hear.

So the journey through cancer is not only a journey of disappointment and despair, although for some people it might end up being just that. It can also become a journey of hope, a journey of renewal. Much depends on the quality of our support system and the kind of persons we are, the resources, and attitudes we have.

Cancer has the potential to create a new spirituality in us, the spirituality of Easter where we are reborn through our suffering. I see that spirituality as a *journey inward*. We learn to take meanings from the world around us: nature, other people. By receiving, absorbing, reflecting, we enrich ourselves.

It is also a *journey outward*. We find meaning by giving ourselves to the world. We share the wisdom we have learned, the teachings we have internalized, the heightened awareness and sensitivity we have developed.

