

THE CHRISTIAN VIRTUE OF HOPE
(A Brief Reference to the Gynaecological Field)
(Theological Perspectives)

In order to address the subject of hope as regards gynaecological questions it would be advisable to present this subject from a broader perspective offered to us by a new concept of health which the much lamented Pope John Paul II gave to us in his Message for the World Day of the Sick, which was celebrated on 11 February of the Jubilee Year 2000. There are two poles which I will stress in order to reflect on this subject: the first is the definition of health according to the thinking given to us by Pope John Paul II and the second is reflection on hope and unborn life in danger.

I. The Concept of Health in John Paul II

The Holy Father John Paul II of venerable memory in section 13 of the Message that has been referred to states that the Christian vision of health cannot be understood in a partial way as an idol to which all other values must be subordinated. He says that “The Christian vision of the human being opposes a notion of health reduced to pure, exuberant vitality and satisfaction with one’s own physical fitness, far removed from any real consideration of suffering”. This vision contrasts with that offered to us by the Pope when he says that health “far from being identified with the mere absence of illness, strives to achieve a fuller harmony and healthy balance on the physical, psychological, spiritual and social level. In this perspective, the person himself is called to mobilize all his available energies to fulfill his own vocation and for the good of others”.

1. The definition of health

According to this description we can thus say that *human health is a striving towards physical, mental, social and spiritual health, and not only the absence of illnesses, which enables the person to carry out the mission that God has given to him, according to the stage of life in which he finds himself.*

The essential element in this definition is the dynamic character of the concept of health which is not an acquired state that one has or one merely loses but a process, a journeying, something alive whose goal is harmony, that is to say the unity of the person. Indeed, we may state that death is disunion, disharmony, and life is the unity of the living being. Thus life is an ascending process towards life itself in fullness, and this ascending process towards one’s own life is health. When the person is not immersed in this ascending process he does not possess health; when, instead, the person is involved in this process, and in the way in which he is involved, he possesses health.

This is a rather complex process in which, as I have pointed out, there are four aspects, namely the physical, the mental, the social and the spiritual. All these aspects have to be harmoniously proportionate; this proportion has as its reference our own vocation which each one of us receives from God, according to the stage of life in which the person finds himself. Thus health is a dynamic process towards harmony which is given by one’s own vocation. Now, one’s own vocation is, and lies in, achieving one’s own realisation, being with God and living with other people.

This harmony is physical, that is to say it involves the absence of illnesses in relative terms, that is to say to the extent to which this or that illness hinders a person from fulfilling his vocation at the stage of

life in which he finds himself. The health of a child is not the same thing as the health of a mature person. What can be said in a child to be an absence of health, in a mature person cannot be defined in the same way. We can say that a mature person experiences this or that illness, but if such illnesses do not interfere in an essential way with the carrying out of his vocational mission, we should not say that such a person does not have health.

Health is also a mental harmony. It thus involves the absence of mental illnesses in such a form as to hinder the fulfilment of the vocation that a person has received. It also means that a person is unified in himself, both mentally and psychically, that is to say he sees himself in an overall and complete way and never a divided way. It also, therefore, implies a harmony in the way in which the person is in possession of himself within himself and despite the possible physical illnesses there may be he does not lose this dominion and security.

It is a social harmony: this harmony implies high quality in relationships with other people. An individual person fulfils his vocation to the extent that he gives himself to others; thus when these relationships are closed or no longer exist we cannot speak about there being health in that person, who is selfishly closed up within himself. This social harmony also implies relationships with the environment, it means the care that one must have for one's own habitat, so that one can facilitate one's own harmony and external harmony. It means not destroying the environment that surrounds one but, rather, always building it not as the irresponsible masters of nature but as authentic Lords who order it.

It is a *spiritual* harmony and this means that the person has a dynamic unity because he has a life project that is united to God Himself. From this springs all health, that is to say the unity of the person and his remaining physical, mental and social health. In concrete terms, this spiritual unification for Christians is only given by Christ in his history, in his glorious death and in his resurrection. From this unification the glorious death of Christ and his resurrection is the point of convergence of all health. It is something by now that one has in life even though not as yet fully. And this is the reason why health is a striving, that is to say something that in part we possess and in part we do not yet possess, but which we will have and which for this reason we so desire.

2. Health and hope

Health constitutes the hope of illness because it is a dynamic striving and this striving means hope; thus to speak about illness and hope is to speak about illness and health. But health itself, too, is today hope, a hope in its totality. It is something that one possesses but which at the same time one does not yet possess; however, one can gradually increase one's possession of it.

The full concept of health brings with it the reality of the death and resurrection of the Lord and in him the death and resurrection of the person who is healthy or sick. In other words, the concept of health brings with it, as a striving, the clear concept of hope. Hope is constitutive of health, it is what gives meaning to health, it is its engine.

3. The stages of life and health

For this reason, hope makes us able to journey through and to pass through the various stages of life, always going forward without stopping. For this reason, no stage of life in this world is an ideal stage, for example youth. This idealisation does not in the least correspond to reality; it would be foolish to want to be always young. Health and thus the stages of life are transitory and each stage has its own beauty and its own task, even though a higher stage always pre-supposes the existence of a lower stage. All the stages of life move towards resurrection. What having health in the various stages of life means is

measured by what has been done in carrying out or otherwise the mission that God has entrusted to us for that specific stage.

We can thus argue that true temporal health is connected with eternal health. The spirituality of temporal health lies specifically in its connection with eternal health.

II. Hope

In order to go deeper into this notion of health, given that hope is basic to it, we can take a step forwards by reflecting a little on what hope means.

1. The secular world and hope

We can say that the contemporary world, as the outcome of secularism, does not have good relations with the virtue of Christian hope; indeed, it has, rather, expelled it from its sphere of comprehension. If one excludes finality, one excludes hope. And the contemporary technical world is a world in which what commands is the possibility to do this or to do that, and purpose does not matter; that is to say, possibility has abolished finality. Thought is often directed towards rules for behaviour and formality no longer matters. One need only look at the moral rules that spring from Kantian philosophy, which is so important in positivistic thinking: the categorical imperative does not arise from the obligation to reach a goal but from agreement. Any eudemonic perspective is denied.

Closure to transcendence is also closure to hope. There is no connection between hope beyond this earth and earthly hope. In the past Marxist world the idea was to replace transcendence with the survival of the collective but the reality of individual death rebels against any mental palliative. Marx thought of the need to liberate the world from hope because hope, in his view, meant withdrawing from reality and instead offering an alienating reality which constitutes specifically that to which he gave his favourite appellation, namely the 'opium of the people'. Nietzsche, for his part, said that the only argument of Christianity is the beatitudes, the hope of the beatitudes; however, because these are a lie then the whole of Christianity is a lie. This thought is hostile to life because Christianity is not an innocent illusion. Freud, on the other hand, asserted that pleasure, impulse, is tempered with reality; contemporary civilisation is a series of illusions, in particular Christian faith with its hope in the life beyond this one. Man must separate himself from the life beyond and concentrate his efforts on the reality of earthly life; thus civilisation will cease to be oppressive. The existentialist position, for its part, was the total denial of hope with its assertion as to the absurdity of living; condemned to live without hope or to have the courage to live. In post-modern thought hope is an absurdity because a valid past or a valid future does not exist; what matters is the present alone.

Therefore with these assumptions it is evident that one cannot accept the definition given of health or the role that it plays in Christian hope. That is to say, in the heart of health as hope there is a whole anthropology, a whole conception of man that comes from the Christian history of salvation.

2. Christian anthropology and hope

Indeed, according to the whole of Biblical anthropology, hope in the future of God always pre-supposes a vocation, the outcome of a Covenant; it is based on a past that is by now over and is projected towards a future promised by God: there is a divine project that makes man await the future. This future, in the final analysis, refers to resurrection, it pre-supposes meeting the concrete wishes of man on this earth as well, so that there is not a total disjunction between them; in the end this future that

is awaited will provide the overall and definitive meaning of history. This future is the Kingdom of God, the Beatitudes realised: it presents itself as a prize. There is always as a basis the waiting for the coming of the Lord. This future is already in a certain sense present, such that in Revelation reference is made more to the visible/invisible plan and the present/future plan; in this way hope is truly connected with faith to all salvation.

It is certainly the case that salvation is held to be based upon grace and one's own merits; these merits are uncertain but grace is certain; for this reason hope has as its object a good, arduous and difficult future, in the view of St. Thomas Aquinas.

Some contemporary theologians have reflected on hope and placed it at the top of their perspectives. Thus G. Marcel states that true hope is located on the plane of the being of the person and not specifically on the plane of having. For E. Bloch hope cannot simply be a repetition of what we have in the world but is something absolutely new; for K. Barth hope opens up to the eschatological Jesus in an unforeseeable future but accepting that his coming already takes place in earthly time; R. Bultmann also thinks of a fully distinct future, that is to say it is not a mythological repetition of what happens today. Gogarten says that secularised man is desperate but in his desperation he can find true hope since in this way man does not bring anything with him on which to base his authentic hope. J. Moltmann states that a faith in God without hope has produced a secularised world without hope, a future without God. Lastly, Pannenberg states that the reality of contemporary events can be understood solely in mutual connection and this is obtained through the event of the future: the resurrection that is by now present. Thus hope is nourished by the partial presence of the resurrection.

To end this summary on the virtue of hope we can say that health in the final analysis has a culminating point in which is realised and from which is obtained all of its meaning, that is to say the resurrection, the death and the resurrection of the Lord. This is the convergent point of the whole of history, it is the point of arrival of all human fulfilment, and first and foremost of health.

3. Death and health

But one can ask why death also belongs to the concept of health: I am thinking here that faith provides us with the answer by stating that, paradoxically, the death of Christ and the death of Christians in Christ rather than being disintegration is mysterious unification in another person and with other persons. Indeed, Christ by his death delivered up his Spirit to the hands of the Father, that is to say through the love of the Spirit he delivered up his life to the Father and thus his life was not lost but found itself in the most intimate vital unity of the Trinity. Through the love for the Spirit, what seemed to be disintegration was converted into the highest integration, since the Father rose Christ from the dead and his death was not a misfortune but a glory and fullness of life, of health. The same happens with the death of a Christian: it is converted into a source of life and resurrection through its integration with the death of Christ himself. This in particular is what is achieved by the anointing of the sick: it conforms the sick person to Christ so that death is not a defeat but truly a victory. To place death as the final goal of hope is the strongest proof of faith, but hope without faith is impossible.

If we now speak about the newborn, or of the unborn, hope, has so to speak, a dual aspect: that of the unborn and that of Christians, family relatives or non-family relatives of new lives. The hope of the unborn is specifically the connection between the visible and the invisible. Visible life is converted into eternal and happy invisible life. The hope of Christians is the total certainty of the arrival of these tender lives, from the embryo or from the foetus, or of the newborn to a life without end in an unending possession of happiness.

3. Resurrection and health

Lastly, in this framework of hope for the unborn and the newborn, a word on resurrection. Resurrection, on the one hand, is truly a continuation of life, thus it is a continuation with the life that we have; in a certain sense it is the harmony that I spoke about in defining health, it is physical, mental, social and spiritual harmony. By now there will not be a striving towards harmony but harmonious reality itself.

But, on the other, resurrection will be something about which we do not have the faintest idea. St. Paul says “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2, 9). Thus hope is certain but obscure, it is something that rises above everything that we can imagine, and, to continue with the definition of health, we can affirm that it is great novelty, both at the physical level and at the mental, social and spiritual levels. It will be a totally distinct health. We will truly have total harmony because the striving towards harmony will finish since harmonious dynamism will have entered into action in a full love of the Holy Spirit. This will be true health, the fullness of health.

Within the overall context of health we can thus see that total health has a number of aspects, for example: fighting against illnesses, to which we all have a right. But if it is seen in its totality, health really extends beyond the sphere of one’s own human rights and is something that is free. The hope that makes us cross the threshold between death and life is free, it is a gift that one receives with humility and gratitude. Thus we receive life at the moment of conception with humility and gratitude, but because life is also a freely-given gift to conceived persons, we all have the obligation to conserve for them their lives here and now; all those who are not yet born hope that we will defend them in their capacity to advance in the different stages of their lives according to the mission that God has chosen for them since eternity. Their hope is placed in us by a solidarity that unites us intimately, because we and they are human persons and we and they have to develop our potentialities as children of God.

This is simplified in the approach of Christ himself who in the book of Revelation tells us: ‘Behold I stand at the door and knock’ (Rev. 3:20). He who is at the door and knocks is not certain that the door will be opened to him; he asks that the door be opened to him, and he hopes. In the same way infants hope in us; in them Christ knocks at the door and hopes for our answer to defend their lives. This approach of Christ to our response, which denotes his profound humility, is our approach to total health, the health that we call eternal health; it is a gift of God; we knock at the door; hoping with all our hearts, but it is always something that is freely-given and humbly asked for. In the final analysis, what we need to defeat is fear of being, the absence of relationships with other people and with things, the non-meaning of existence, fracture with the project of our own existence, fear of nothing, death. And this victory is nothing other but the resurrection of Christ which is communicated to us as mere grace.

Vatican City, November 2008

+ Javier Card. Lozano Barragán
 President of the Pontifical Council
 for Health Care Workers
 (for health pastoral care)