

TO REVERSE THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE, TRY HUMILITY

The social tradition of the church constantly has decried violence. Pope Paul VI was clear when he stated: “The Church cannot accept violence ... because she knows that violence always provokes violence and irresistibly engenders new forms of oppression and enslavement.”¹



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Pope John Paul II echoed this sentiment with an impassioned condemnation of violence:

“The Church proclaims that violence is evil, that violence is unacceptable as a solution to problems; that violence is unworthy of humanity. Violence is a lie, for it goes against the truth of our faith, the truth of our humanity. Violence destroys what it claims to defend: the dignity,

the life, the freedom of human beings.”²

More recently, Pope Francis suggested a solution to the rampant and devastating violence that affects nations:

“Our world is being torn apart by wars and violence, and wounded by a widespread individualism which divides human beings. ... I especially ask Christians in communities throughout the world to offer a radiant and attractive witness of fraternal communion. Let everyone admire how you care for one another, and how you encourage and accompany one another.”³

THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE

The solution offered by Pope Francis, while obviously true, often is difficult to put into practice. Living in a world wounded by violence, many find

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There may be a theological reason for this, explained Tobias Winright, PhD, an associate professor of Christian ethics at Saint Louis University: “Probably one of the most uncontested claims anyone could make is that we live in a world often marred by conflict, hatred, and violence. These are symptoms of human sinfulness, whereby we put ourselves on a pedestal, making ourselves equal to God. In other words, human self-assertion leads to our alienation from God, one another, and indeed all of creation.”⁴

For Winright, as for so many others in the Christian theological tradition, violence is rooted in sinful human pride that in turn leads to social alienation. Pride becomes the opposite of solidarity — it separates us from one another by our desiring to place ourselves above the other. It gives rise to an ethnocentrism or even a solipsism that only can see the other as of less value, or of no value at all. In fact, pride often reduces the other to something less than human.

It is easy to see dehumanization in war, terrorism or in other overt forms of violence. But can similar devaluing of the other also occur in Catholic health care institutions? As we see the effects of violence in the larger society, do we need to examine our own collective conscience? Should we label the lack of access to appropriate health care, or health disparities among social and ethnic groups, or disrespectful treatment of patients, for what they really are: subtle — and perhaps not so subtle — forms of violence?

In his best-seller, *When Breath Becomes Air*, Paul Kalanithi, a neurological surgery resident at

Stanford University who died of cancer in 2015, spoke of his transformation from physician and researcher to patient with a terminal disease. Reflecting on this journey, he mused: “How little we doctors understand the hell though which we put patients.”⁵ As he himself became patient, Kalani-thi needed to confront his own pride:

“My own hubris as surgeon stood naked to me now: As much as I focused on my responsibility and power over patients’ lives, it was at best a temporary responsibility, a fleeting power. Once an acute crisis has been resolved, the patient and family go on living — and things are never quite the same.”⁶

He concluded that physicians need to meet their patients “in a space where [patients] are persons instead of a problem to be solved.”⁷

Seeing the other truly as a person is key to overcoming the many forms of violence that affect and infect us. *The Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services* maintains, “the well-being of the whole person must be taken into account.”⁸ They emphasize that those involved in health care need to form relationships with patients and their families that avoid “manipulation, intimidation, or condescension.”⁹

In his great social encyclical, “On the Progress of Peoples,” Pope Paul VI saw that for most of us, our attachments to our particular ways of doing things imprison and restrict our vision. He continued, “Then we see hearts harden and minds close, and men no longer gather together in friendship but out of self-interest, which soon leads to oppositions and disunity.”¹⁰ He calls for those in power to “see” in new ways. In the journey that Kalani-thi described, it took his own terminal illness for him to be able to “see” the patient in a new way. I would like to suggest that first step to this new way of seeing, to overcoming pride and reversing the cycle of violence, is the virtue of humility.

THE VIRTUE OF HUMILITY

Right away, we need to reject a contemporary understanding that equates humility with self-deprecation. For too many, humility is the attitude represented by Uriah Heep in Charles Dickens’s novel, *David Copperfield*. He describes himself as

“the ’umblest person going”¹¹ and continuously grovels before “Master Copperfield.” The German philosopher and scholar of St. Thomas Aquinas, Josef Pieper, who died in 1997, explained, “In the whole tractate of St. Thomas concerning humility and pride, there is not a single sentence to suggest an attitude, on principle, of constant self-accusation, of disparagement of one’s being and doing, of cringing inferiority feelings, as belonging to humility or to any other Christian virtue.”¹²

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In the Christian tradition, the virtue of humility is simply “knowing who we are” — especially knowing who we are before God. It acknowledges both our strengths and our real weaknesses. It allows us to face our limitations and to experience our contingency as well as rejoice in our real possibilities. The medieval Franciscan theologian, St. Bonaventure of Bagnorea, maintained that humility is the very foundation of “all Christian perfection.” He described it as “the gate of wisdom, the foundation of justice, and the dwelling place of grace.”¹³ It leads to wisdom, as it allows us to see ourselves as God sees us. It moves us to justice, for it enables us to give to others what we owe them as sisters and brothers. It is grace, since it arises out of gratitude for what God has done for us.

Humility moves a person from seeking power over others and enables the person to enjoy power with others and for others. Humility is reverential knowledge that relates us to the other; it becomes the first step toward true solidarity. Humility allows the person to respond to the other without defensiveness or arrogance.

Rather than a self-effacing and demeaning form of groveling, humility leads to a spiritual freedom. When asked how one attains true human freedom, St. Augustine answered that “the first step is humility, and the second step is hu-

mility again, and the third step is humility; and as often as you may ask, I would give the same answer: humility.”¹⁴

Humility is the true antidote for violence. It is a necessary virtue in our contemporary age insofar as it counteracts the arrogance and self-centeredness that lead us to dehumanize the other, whether that occurs in war or in a hospital bed. It thus is a virtue that is just as important in the field of health care as it is in international relations.

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NOTES

1. Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, par. 37.
2. Pope John Paul II, Address at Drogheda, Ireland, Sept. 29, 1979, quoted in Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington D.C.: USCCB Publishing, 2005), par. 496.
3. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, par 99.
4. Tobias Winright, “Gather Us In and Make Us Channels of Your Peace: Evaluating War with an Entirely New Attitude,” in David Matzko McCarthy and M. Therese Lysaught, eds., *Gathered for the Journey: Moral Theology in Catholic Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 287.
5. Paul Kalanithi, *When Breath Becomes Air* (New York: Random House, 2016), 102.
6. Kalanithi, 166.
7. Kalanithi, 90.
8. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, 5th ed. (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 2009), Directive 33.
9. *Directives*, Introduction to Part Three.
10. Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, par. 19.
11. Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1850), 167.
12. Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 188.
13. See *Disputed Questions on Evangelical Perfection*, Question 1, Conclusion. Bonaventure refers to John 14:6 and acknowledges Christ as the way, the truth and the life. Humility thus relates to grace, since Christ is the way; relates to the truth of justice, since Christ is the truth; and to a taste for wisdom, since it recognizes that Christ is the life.
14. St. Augustine of Hippo, *Epistola* 118, 22. Quoted in Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978) 446.

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