

He ain't heavy, he's my brother!



While Christmas is a time of giving presents because we recognize the great Present that God the Father made by giving us his only Son, Jesus, Christmas is more about being present than exchanging presents. It's about becoming bread more than just feeding, it's about welcoming others in our lives as brothers and sisters.

With this in mind I want to share with you a story that began 9 months ago. On Holy Thursday, 2018 after visiting a little girl in the ICU who was found in the morning abandoned and wrapped in a blanket hidden under a stairwell, I was walking my way back to the office of the St Damien Hospital and heard a cry coming from the oncology room. I immediately thought it was the cry of a mother who lost her child. As I approached the room, the screaming, yelling and crying became louder and, as I entered, there was an 11-year boy with a malignant eye tumor who was crying: "Poukisa ou pa komprann m? (Why don't you understand?) Okenn moun pa konprann mwen!" (Nobody understands me!). His mother was in tears trying to understand and comfort him while the nurse and doctor were doing everything to address his pain medically. I asked the boy "Sak pase?" (What's going on?), and again he pointed out how nobody was able to understand him. I was surprised when he said: "Paret yo pa konprann mwen malad. Yo mande mwen dwe pasyan men yo pa konprann sa m ap pase." (It seems as they do not understand I'm sick. They ask me to be patient but they do not understand what I'm going through). At those words I just knelt at the side of his bed, and put my hand on his chest. I quietly stood there trying to understand not so much his physical pain as his spiritual. I prayed quietly for peace and after he began to calm down and breathe slowly, I asked if we could pray while I gave him a blessing. He said yes and while doing it I began to feel a headache and then my eyes began to hurt badly. The pain was so intense that I had to stand up and leave promising him that I would come back later. He said: "I don't have pain now, thank you! Please come again."

Fabrice made me realize that we may know how to pronounce beautiful sentences about suffering, but we don't always approach it properly. I became aware, although I had recently gone through a major painful surgery and recovery with my shoulder and thought I fully understood the aspect of suffering, that I initially ignored his need to embrace his suffering in his own way. I quickly came to understand that rather than talking about illness, it would be necessary to observe and listen to the sick person, who in his suffering situation has something to tell us and teach us, the one who can reveal us to ourselves, putting us in the grips of the seriousness of life. It is therefore only with fear and trembling and with great humility that I "dare to say" something about suffering. But it is also essential to risk a word on this reality that is part of every human life, because if the word is what specifies the human being, it is through the act of speaking that we can invent paths of meaning. From this point of view, saying a word about illness and suffering is a perennial challenge that we must always face, in the awareness that it is not about "giving an answer", but is actually about making our own inexhaustible research that will be equally essential to our humanization as with the question: "Who am I?". We humanize ourselves by questioning ourselves, and the question and reflection on illness and, more generally, on suffering, is inherent with the task of becoming human.

In reality, rather than abstract and singular suffering, we encounter concrete suffering in men and women: we see sickness reflected in their faces and bodies. I can never forget the women crying for the losses of their children especially when they know that the child could have been saved were it not for the lack of roads or of means of

transportation or of money that made them arrive too late to the hospital. They roll themselves on the ground in mourning, and their voices transform into a sorrowful refrain of “God: why?” Nor can I forget the poor people lined up at Croix des Bossales where Fr. Rick ministers as a doctor in collaboration with the Missionaries of Charity. If you would only see the place, you would never imagine going there for treatment unless you were truly desperate. The pain in the eyes of sick children, people with tumors that have completely disfigured their faces, wounds that are impossible to look at and to smell... These are real people afflicted by very different and serious diseases.

Consider also the specifics involved in being seropositive or physically disabled or marked by psychic illnesses in such a poor environment as Haiti where many times the barriers are both structural and cultural. In fact, certain diseases are considered as a curse or a diabolic possession; sometimes those affected by mental illness are considered as zombies with the risk of being stoned because of fear. I’ll never forget the two deaf-mutes who got lost in Port-Au-Prince and were walking in the darkness struggling to ask for information to find their way back, but instead were stoned to death! And how can I not recall Lisam, a deaf man carrying his child in his arms half dead because of malnutrition. The poor man screaming sounds, unable to communicate and frustrated because nobody was able to understand.

So often we forget that those who suffer are first of all human beings, children of God and in a special way the presence of Christ. We identify them often by their disease rather than their name. We are often afraid to approach and talk to the sick because we do not know what to say or understand what they need to hear; without realizing it, we actually create a distance instead of shortening it, we isolate instead of including and build barriers instead of knocking them down.

In sickness all relationships, with oneself, with others, with things and with God, undergo a profound change. The disease becomes an entity that must be closely observed, where the patient is called to listen again, to see and to understand reality from an absolutely new angle. There is a humiliating regression to a state of dependence on others. The patient knows the experience of fragility, finitude, distance and estrangement from himself and others; he suffers the disease as a dramatic epiphany of the limits of his independence. But in this negativity the revelation of the necessary acceptance of limits as the secret of life is also inherent: to live means to assume the manifold limits that existence itself presents to us. But although every tentative cure is exhausted there is still space to “take care”. There is always space for compassion, love and a profound spiritual experience particularly baptismal and eucharistic because it’s only by descending the ladder of humility that we can sit around the table as brothers and sisters where the bread is broken or as the Magi find the King in a manger.

Only when the relationship between the visitor and the sick person becomes a meeting of the “poor in spirit, the ones who mourn, the meek...” can the relationship with the sick become a place of communion, love and responsibility. Each person, to the extent possible is called to the responsibility of understanding the course of suffering, the purpose of suffering, and the Christ-like way to face that suffering and find God through it.

I’d like to recall the scene of the “Lord of the Rings” when Frodo and Sam are climbing Mount Doom to accomplish the mission to destroy the ring that has become a true burden. Frodo is worn by the heaviness of the ring and is willing to give up as he cannot take it further anymore. At this point Samwise begins a dialogue with Frodo:

***“Samwise Gamgee:** Do you remember the Shire, Mr. Frodo? It'll be spring soon, and the orchards will be in blossom. And the birds will be nesting in the hazel thicket. And they'll be sowing the summer barley in the lower fields. And they'll be eating the first of the strawberries with cream. Do you remember the taste of strawberries?*

***Frodo Baggins:** No, Sam. I can't recall the taste of food, nor the sound of water, nor the touch of grass. Instead, I'm... naked in the dark. There's nothing. No veil between me and the wheel of fire! I can see him... with my waking eyes!*

Samwise Gamgee:** Then let us be rid of it! Once and for all! Come on, Mr. Frodo. **I can't carry it for you... but I can carry you! Come on! ...

So many times, I have been in situations where the patient says: “I wanna go...”, “I can’t take this this anymore”, “I just want to die” or even blaspheming against God... The spoken words are to be taken, absorbed, digested, and I would dare to say contemplated. These expressions are true, they reveal the heaviness of the burden, they are the words of Job. These aren’t the moments to give a lecture on what is right or wrong as Job’s friends did. These are the moments in which we are called to listen in silence and as Viktor Frankl wrote in his book “Homo Patiens” (The suffering being): *“If suffering makes sense, so does the sharing of suffering and compassion; and just as suffering, compassion is mute: language has limits. Where words say so little, don’t say a word.”*

Sam, in front of the surrender of Frodo, does not remind him of his duty and purpose. He recalls the good memories of the Shire, of the “old days” and when Frodo can’t even “taste” with his memory what is being recalled, Sam offers to “carry” his friend. Someone might say that such a thing could happen only when assisting a friend or family member, but I say that as chaplains we are all called to be like Simon of Cyrene, who didn’t know Jesus and helped carry the cross. We may not know the patient we visit but we do know that it is ultimately the Christ we are helping: “I was sick and you visited me...”.

I still don’t fully understand what happened that day with Fabrice, but, like Sam, I just decided to “carry” him and his pain with me and discovered that Fabrice is no longer a stranger and as the song says: “He Ain’t Heavy, He’s My Brother”

The road is long
With many a winding turn
That leads us to who knows where
Who knows where
But I'm strong
Strong enough to carry him
He ain't heavy, he's my brother
So on we go
His welfare is of my concern
No burden is he to bear
We'll get there
For I know
He would not encumber me
He ain't heavy, he's my brother
If I'm laden at all
I'm laden with sadness
That everyone's heart
Isn't filled with the gladness
Of love for one another
It's a long, long road
From which there is no return
While we're on the way to there
Why not share
And the load
Doesn't weigh me down at all
He ain't heavy he's my brother
He's my brother
He ain't heavy, he's my brother, he ain't heavy
Songwriters: Bob Russell / Bobby Scott
He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother lyrics © Music Sales Corporation

Three weeks ago, Fabrice asked me: “kisa m bezwen pou fè premye kominyon an?” (what do I need to do to receive first communion?). The question filled my heart with joy because since the first day I met him, he always asks during my visits for an explanation of a biblical passage and for me to pray for him and give him a blessing. It’s become sort of a ritual and now he calls the other children and parents at my arrival to pray together. Every time I left his room I felt as I had to do something else. I honestly felt like Jesus during the second multiplication when seeing the crowd said: *“My heart is moved with pity for the crowd, for they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, for fear they may collapse on the way.”* Mt 15:32.

This Christmas Jesus came again into the world and found the best place to be present: Fabrice. Like the Magi followed the star, I followed the cry. They gave to Jesus what they had and returned full of joy. I gave what I had and definitely received much more by celebrating his first communion! Merry Christmas!