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Healing Presence: The Reality of God's Presence in Pastoral Ministry

Each generation has sought to grasp the specifics of pastoral care in several ways. In the past, this mainly meant possibly integrating the conclusions from different psychological schools. Without disregarding the useful aspects of these findings, I would like to examine the dimension of pastoral care that the available literature has scarcely covered. Below, I would like to focus on pastoral care in terms of the Healing Presence of God. First, I discuss the question of God's presence, then gather the conditions and opportunities in which room for God's healing work can be consciously provided when pastoral care is practised.

1. God's Presence is a Healing Presence¹

The Czech philosopher Jolana Poláková discusses *relative and absolute transcendence* in search for 21st-century mankind's images of hope (POLÁKOVÁ, 2005). As an example, the search for relative transcendence may be found in the healing processes originating in positive and transpersonal psychology. The absolutely transcendent, on the other hand, humans cannot capture; that encounter cannot be created unless the transcendent himself interacts with man. Poláková's work draws our attention to an unconscious functioning of our time; 21st-century people, both in their personal lives and in helping relationships, tend to forget about the latter and are content with the images of hope, opportunities, and achieved well-being that arise from purely psychological categories; moreover, we Christians are no exception. Therefore, it is useful to keep reflecting on the search for the transcendent in the depths of our pastoral care ministry and the extent to which we anticipate the true presence of God as we stand with our brothers in service.

When thinking about the presence of God, its objective reality must be separated from its subjective experience. The psychology of religion regards its unique construction, comprising a combination of several elements that vary from person to person, as a representation of God. Its elements consist of the following: (1) early relationship with parents, (2) desired, idealized

¹ A distinction is made between *God's Healing Presence* and the human initiative as well as an encounter that is referred to as *healing presence*, which intentionally and consciously creates and provides room for God's free and sovereign work. One expresses the presence of God, the other rather the conscious presence of man, which simultaneously pays attention to God and man. A distinction is made between the two by using capital and italic lettering.

images of parents, (3) remnants of the child's narcissistic self-esteem and (4) culturally as well as socially adapted conceptual ideas of God (WIKSTRÖM, 2000, 50-51). These elements together form a mental and emotional construction, which is both subjective and real.

Therefore, by nature, man must create gods. Without a doubt, this subjective representation of the Divine requires continuous correction: that is, healing, which occurs in the presence of the healing God.

Over the various periods of Church history, theological studies have mostly discussed God's presence in relation to his omnipotence by examining his divine perfections and attributes primarily in static categories (BRUNNER, 1946). The reality and essence of God's presence are presented to us much more plastically and dynamically by biblical testimonies. Although neither ideas nor wording present a unified picture, a unified conviction in the context of so many expressions can be discovered.

The Old Testament speaks of the Highest Lord in Heaven, relying on mythical-symbolic depictions that adjust the ancient worldview of the Middle East. The Highest Lord, who is distant, remains still present but inaccessible to man. Only God can bridge this ontological distance ('hiding' as implied in biblical language) (WANKE, 2013). Therefore, it is significant that the Highest Lord, who exists to us as a distant and hiding God, yet he seeks to keep and redeem man. We find the symbolic descriptions of God's omnipresence in the Bible not only in the field of cosmology, as is discussed in regular theologies, but also in soteriology (BRUNNER, 1946). God in Heaven, who seems distant and hiding, is also an intimate, caring Father who always watches over man and he himself bridges the gap between himself and man (KAISER, 1998).

The New Testament expresses God – who is not only present but actively arrives, approaches man, and enters into a saving and healing relationship – even more strongly. The event of this is the Revelation itself, documented in the Scriptures, and its embodied reality is Jesus Christ, the embodiment of the Word, who, after his Ascension into Heaven and appearance at Pentecost, remains present here on Earth in the form of his Holy Spirit.

As a result, the presence of God stands as the central message of biblical testimony, in not merely a constant but a dynamic arrival. He is the One who is to come and is approaching. The whole Revelation exists basically in the service of this news. The God that is approaching us, is present as a saviour, which, in agreement with Tillich, is a Healing Presence:

“With respect to both the original meaning of salvation (from *salvus*, ‘healed’) and our present situation, it may be adequate to interpret salvation as ‘healing.’ (...) In this sense, healing means reuniting that which is estranged, giving a center to what is split, overcoming the split between God and man, man and his world, man and himself.” (TILLICH, 1957, 166)

So the arrival of God, his presence and the process of salvation fulfilled in Christ, is healing; that is, the reality of God’s Healing Presence. This presence embraces not only each person’s story but also the entirety of history, embodied in the form of the Holy Spirit’s work in our age. The Holy Spirit enables people to find their places and turn to God, in other words, ignites faith; moreover, It produces the fruits of reborn life. All this manifests the realization of God’s Healing Presence, which leads to personal salvation, well-being, and completeness. (FEE, 1994) Calvin worded this as follows: “The things spoken concerning Christ profit us by the secret working of the Spirit.” (CALVIN, 2006, 537) The Spirit is “the root and seed of heavenly life in us.” (CALVIN, 2006, 538)

2. Model of the Healing Presence in Pastoral Care

In pastoral conversations, the God of the Holy Trinity is the source of healing and new life born from Above. The question we face remains: how can this source define and affect the pastoral care relationship and process? Below, I examine the dimension of God’s Healing Presence during a pastoral care meeting based on the model of healing presence.

The term ‘healing presence’ refers to one-on-one or group meetings that come to life thanks to the secrets of God’s grace, in which room is provided for God’s will that brings reconciliation and healing in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the new creation unfolding in Christ, that is, the Kingdom of God, becomes ever more real both with regard to the lives of those participating in the meeting and the relationships between the participants and their surroundings. A healing presence may take on the form of a pastoral care meeting, spiritual help, or brothers and sisters praying together; these are the practices of faith orientation that signify God’s presence. Consequently, it is not a healing process created by human methods but rather a presence offered by believing in the Other. It – on behalf of the pastoral counsellor – recognises, for himself and in terms of the relationship, the “breaking point” that defines the whole encounter. The Living Lord, who has come close to us in the person of Jesus Christ and remains present in the form of his Holy Spirit, takes advantage of the human connection and

bestows his resources, forcing superhuman potential into this presence. “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.” (Matthew 18:20)

Meanwhile, it is important to note that while previous kerygmatic pastoral theories understood a shift in the focus of the conversation via the term “breaking point” (THURNEYSSEN, 1950, 94-107), Michael Meyer-Blanck uses it as a hermeneutical category, a theological premise, meaning the re-evaluation and reframing of the life event in the focus of pastoral care (MEYER-BLANCK, 2007, 29-30), in which healing presence is discussed in a phenomenological sense. The phenomenon itself consists of a breaking point, the existence of the Transcendent who gives himself yet to the end remains transcendent. The One who arrives from beyond human and is present turns this human encounter into a healing presence. In reality, as it progresses, this encounter cannot be separated from physical-spiritual-mental-communal conditions and realizations, since it involves humans. This healing presence cannot be distinguished from everyday meetings because it encompasses our physical, spiritual, psychological and social realities/selves.

The most important prerequisite of a conscious reliance on this presence must be the unwavering relationship with the Healer, the Author of Salvation, at least from a pastoral point of view. To maintain this relationship, religious practices supporting spiritual formation play a role. These practices ensure regular contact between God and man, thereby providing room for the Spirit to work and foster growth in Christ. Immersing oneself and spending time in spiritual activities makes man more and more sensitive to the voice of the Spirit; that is, to the perception of the Healing Presence’s reality, which is also dominant in the process of pastoral care.

When this presence, practised both in the form of communal or personal quiet times and mastered as well as being open and obedient to God, is dedicated to the service of pastoral care, it provides room for the God of the Holy Trinity to be continuously present at the centre of our meetings (see Figure 2).

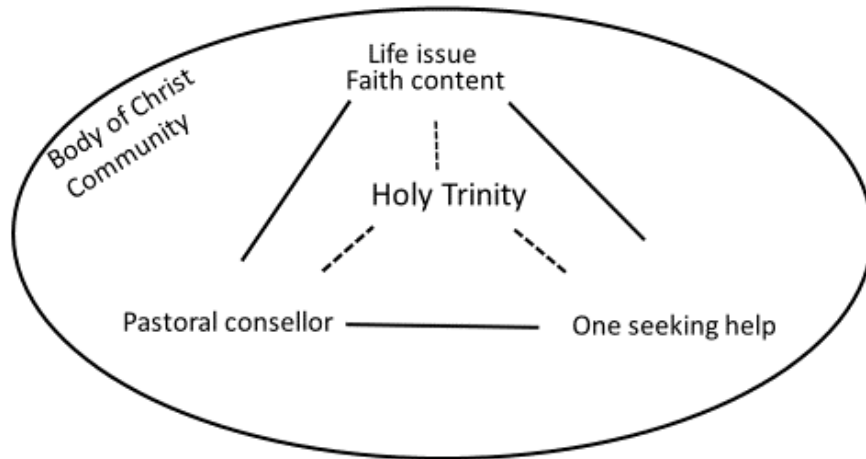


Figure 1: Model of healing presence

As is illustrated by the model drawn, all the connections found within the healing presence – (1) between the two participants, (2) between the one seeking help and the life issue/faith content, (3) between the pastoral counsellor and the difficulty outlined by the one seeking help – happen in raising awareness of God’s new life-giving will.

(1) *The relationship hidden in God*

A key and decisive element of psychotherapeutic support conversations is the initiative of the person seeking help. Thus, the meetings consist of a preplanned asymmetrical set-up. The client seeks help from a specialist with regard to a mental or relationship problem in his or her life. The specialist attempts to help with his or her professional competencies by focusing on the client. The therapist puts into practice his expertise, while the client presents his life problems and his competencies still available.

In contrast, in meetings with the healing presence, that is, God's presence, his healing will and power appear from the very beginning. God through Christ seeks out individuals in need of help. Therefore, the seeker does not initiate the relationship but rather the actions of God initiate it. Even the departure, the approach, is the embodiment of God's grace, which can be accomplished in several ways: following the initiative of the individual in need or of a neighbour who recognizes his or her need for help (see the Good Samaritan), or alternatively, as a result of the specific call and commission of God (see the Ethiopian Eunuch and Philip).

Of course, depending on the nature of the pastoral care, this can be achieved within a framework of professional competence; however, God's gracious approach towards us remains the number one priority in the relationship.

In the Trinity with God, the relationship is based on God's immeasurable love. Ben Johnson writes about spiritual direction, which remains also applicable to the pastoral care relationship: "God loves the director and the directee; both are recipients of a grace they do not earn or deserve. This grace is theirs because of the nature of God. Without this assurance of grace, who would have the courage to confront him- or herself? Without this love, who would dare to enter into (the) depth of another's life?" (JOHNSON, 2004, 113) Therefore, grace provides the circumstance in which pastoral care is provided.

By meeting in the presence of God, both the helper and the individual being helped actually experience the Healing Presence and grace of the New Creation; the two together are recipients of God's actions. In this trinity, where God's gracious will precedes community, the participants are placed in a symmetrical relationship wherein they devote themselves together to the deeds of God. "Because Christ stands between me and another, I must not long for (an) unmediated community with that person. As only Christ was able to speak to me in such a way that I was helped, so others too can only be helped by Christ alone. However, this means that I must release others from all my attempts to control, coerce, and dominate them with my love." (BONHOEFFER, 1954, 42-43) Bonhoeffer writes about the community in Christ; therefore, the participants are in fact mutually serving each other, since they are both used by God to help the life of the other. Both the helper and the individual being helped portray the reality of God within his or her own life chances, formation, and growth, which all occur during their encounter.

(2) *In the presence of God, life issue is a faith content*

Likewise, life issues formed in the presence of God, difficulties that are waiting to be healed, are seen differently. Jesus transforms the need for help of those being in need and suffering from an illness into a whole new context. God sees the possibility of doing glorious deeds in life situations associated with sin and needs. Here is how he responds to the disciples who

investigated the cause of a disease: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.” (John 9:2-3) Elsewhere, Jesus spoke to the Pharisees who challenged him: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Mark 2:17) Sickness, neediness, and weakness, create room for God’s presence and the possibility to meet Jesus. Therefore, the question of life becomes a question of faith: who do I relate my deficiencies and brokenness in life to?

In our time, the increasing number of help methods available creates the illusion that any deficiency can be resolved by lifestyle changes, physical as well as mental training, and committed work. A Christian – while struggling with vulnerability in the form of physical illnesses, mental disorders, psychological difficulties, relationship problems and doubts about faith – can choose to follow one of two paths. He or she can take matters into his or her own hands or seek God and, in connection with the challenges of life awaiting him or her, face difficulties *together* with him.

Pargament investigated this phenomenon by identifying five styles of religious coping, two of which are described to explain our topic (PARGAMENT, 1997). In this self-directed style, the struggler seeks out a source of self-control. Despite believing in God, he or she emphasizes his personal autonomy and responsibility for his or her own life. Studies have shown that although this type of religious coping can help in controllable challenging life situations, in uncontrollable borderline situations it not only decreases in effectiveness but is accompanied by negative consequences such as anxiety, anger, depression, as well as stress-related disorders and symptoms.

In the collaborative coping style, the source of control is the relationship between man and God. One feels responsible for problem solving in which both religious actions and secular possibilities are suitable. However, the emphatic relationship with God also provides purpose, meaning and emotional security. One realizes that it is not only his or her own desires and personal difficulties that play a role in how situations develop. The reality of the Kingdom of God sheds a whole new light on humanity’s life events. According to the results of empirical studies, this is the most effective style of religious coping (PARGAMENT, 1997). It takes the human physical, spiritual, and social possibilities available seriously. On the other hand, it does not neglect our deficiencies in every area of life. We live separated from God in damaged

relationships. These relationships need to be dealt with not only horizontally but also vertically. After all, the spiritual aspect of life does not exist as a distinct area but it penetrates all dimensions of human life. The primary question remains whether one is living through a certain life phase burdened with that difficulty in the presence of God, in relation to him, relying on him. Or I am alienated and longing to be in the presence of God who restores life, and helps me return into fellowship with Him, and to be healed.

(3) In the presence of God, as a pastoral counsellor, with questions of the one seeking help

As mentioned above, the healing presence differs from daily spontaneous conversations and meetings that might be organised for a variety of intentions and in diverse forms in a way that there is – at least from the pastoral point of view – a conscious offering of faith, a turning to God and a presence attentive to God in relation to the topics brought up in the conversation. All this cannot be achieved by prescribed forms, actions, or methods, but by the orientation of the heart. During these meetings, the way the pastoral counsellor relates the Good News, the promises fulfilled by Christ, or the Gospel to the particular life issues, is significant. This can happen in a prayerful presence as the helper accompanies the one seeking help or depending on the religiosity of the person sitting opposite, all religious symbolic words and actions that display – related to the life issues – the divine will, the healing word or the Healing Presence may play a role during the meeting.

Specific religious elements do not guarantee the relationship of a Christian community with God. Conversely, this relationship, based on faith, is represented in the form of symbolic deeds and religious practices. Likewise, in the healing presence, symbolic words and actions do not create God's presence, but rather through the dimension of earthly relations that are instead the emphatic representatives of creed, the orientation of the heart, and the embodiment of the Healing Presence. During the conversation, depending on the meeting's nature, this can be expressed and represented in silent prayer focusing on God or explicitly using symbolic, religious language and/or rites; e.g., prayer, reading the Bible, silently meditating on him, lighting candles, anointing with oil, laying hands on others, blessings, etc., all of which aim to tackle the life and faith issues of the one seeking help.

Of course, all the skills that help us better understand and make progress with regard to the issues of the one in need remain equally important. These skills – which can be learned,

practised, acquired (FERRIS, 2004) as well as wisely and appropriately applied by the help of the Holy Spirit at the right time during the meeting – are the following: listening, showing respect, being empathetic, exploring the life issue and faith content, confronting when necessary, and exposing our individual selves appropriately, as well as prayer, in which we make a request for God's Healing Presence.

4. Faith community embraced by the Kingdom

Finally, one last characteristic of the healing presence must be mentioned, a characteristic described in the above model. In our age, a rapidly increasing number of forums count on the spiritual orientation of people that are also included in the therapeutic process. It is increasingly important to emphasize that God does not provide himself in general nor individually separate ways but offers himself and is present for mankind in the communion of the body of Christ. Makkai emphasises this in his work on pastoral care: “Pneumatic life is possible only in communion with Christ – the Head – as well as the souls and members.” (MAKKAI, 1947, 35) In the diagram above, this definiteness is denoted by the line encircling the chart. God's Healing Presence – which works on the sanctity of a new life in the church, namely in the congregation – is unveiled in the reality of the body of Christ, by “the community inducting it into its own life-giving, healing, comforting, serving fellowship.” (MAKKAI, 1947, 35)

In his work for the Finkenwalde Seminary, Bonhoeffer discusses this: “Christian community is not an ideal, but a divine reality; (...) Christian community is a spiritual [pneumatische] and not a psychic [psychische] reality.” (BONHOEFFER, 1996, 35) This means that we need each other by the will of Jesus Christ, through him we find each other, because the Father has united us in himself. When the Healing Presence of God is realized in any form when two people meet, reconciliation and fellowship ensue, which are very different connections compared to any other community resulting from human sympathy. The healing presence originates from and moves towards this community. It is therefore necessary that pastoral service should remain congregational and, in the context of professionalization, should not be separated from the communal mission of the Church and the reality of the body of Christ.

At the heart of the healing presence, through our belief in and active cooperation with the God of the Holy Trinity, we find he is present in the form of his merciful, redeeming, and healing will to create something new. This will actively connects, as a person, to both the participants and their questions raised during the conversation. A healing presence attends directly when

one brother fully supports another in such a natural way that in this meeting they submit to the will of what God prepares for them, then and there. By yielding to the call, the possibility arises for both participants, namely the counsellor and the one seeking help, to be part of God's story. Most importantly, a desire must exist for the life God wants to bestow on us. Pastoral counsellors must dedicate themselves to God's cleansing, correcting, and sanctifying work; moreover, they must be willing to stand alongside others, walk with them and invite them to set off on this journey, knowing that Christ begs for us incessantly:

“...My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, (verse 21) that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us...” (John 17:20)

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