

MedConference 2010

Medical care and the person: the heart of the matter – Final Remarque

One of the participants asked me yesterday why we have chosen the ‘Icarus’ of Matisse as a symbol for this year conference? His question provoked me and made me realize that we are in a journey, and I would like to briefly share with you the steps I believe we have done together.

As many of you recall, last year MedConference (1) portrayed the painting ‘The fall of Icarus’ by Chagall, where the falling Icarus is ‘welcome’ by the people of the town trying to catch him while falling. You could see this painting on the editorial of the most recent issue of the Journal of MeP (2). I mentioned that we, as caregivers, identify ourselves very much in that crowd trying to catch Icarus. That is, we started our profession in order to help people, so that the origin of our profession has to do with this original desire that each person finds within themselves, that is to give themselves to others.

So, last year conference – with the title “Why do we take care of others?” – was focused on the motivation for our profession. And we discovered that in order to sustain this desire – to give ourselves to others – we need help. The first step is provoking each other to use our heart in our profession and by communicating to each other how this way of facing reality changes our gaze on the patients and therefore our profession.

This year we made another step.

The ‘Icarus’ by Matisse is NOT falling, he is flying, why? Because he is aware of his heart – the red dot – and the heart is the recognition of the Mystery as the origin of our desire and as a promise of fulfillment. As Luigi Giussani (3) said in 1986, commenting on this same painting, “This Icarus can fly because he met the One who makes the heart and who can fulfill it”.

This is an analogy of what has happened here during this conference. We saw a piece of a new world, as it was witnessed by each of your contributions. Specifically, a piece of a new world in the world of the medical profession. Physicians, nurses, students, young physicians on training, every aspect of our profession has been looked at by a new viewpoint.

Even the session of the Health Care Reform, perhaps the most arid, was very peculiar in that this subject was not faced – as usual – in terms of political confrontation or in terms of money interests, rather speakers and moderator judged this reform from the viewpoint of the advocacy to the patient. In doing that, they demonstrated the limit of this reform that is mainly focused on money issue. It has also been pointed out that in US there is a profound disparity between extraordinary high expenses for medical care and mediocre results in terms of survival. This is the result of an exaggerated number of diagnostic tests being ordered for the treat of lawsuit. Clearly the real problem of health care in US is the broken relationship between caregivers and patients. A proper health care reform should have been indeed focused, first of all, on restoring this relationship and not only because it would save money... In fact, it is our nature that demands the presence of someone trustable, especially when we are sick and vulnerable. As Ms. Vicky Aryenyo said “each person needs unconditional love, a love beyond what you deserve”.

This new way to live our profession becomes a new culture, as Miss Saenz demonstrated in her talk related to her nursing training focused on the specific needs of each of her trainees or as the Canadian students demonstrated with several letters published in newspapers, standing with their patients who require care and attention, in one word, love, more than euthanasia. Certainly the promotion of the Journal of Medicine and the Person as expression of this viewpoint, will be a very important tool.

This way to look at our job, our patients is beautiful, attractive and fascinating. One of the young students asked me “What is it that all the speakers have in common? It is not about being religious or being catholic, it is a humanity as I never saw before, and it is so similar among the people who spoke.”

Here we have to be clear. The origin of what she could pinpoint, but not define, is the Beauty of the Divine, in His human form, is the Beauty of He who claims to live among us, God in His human form. And we have to say this because what has been happening here corresponds so much to our nature, in a way that would be otherwise so impossible.

How did we get here? I believe that the best explanation comes from our students. They came to the 2009 MedConference with many doubts and questions, then they went home and they worked very seriously on the proposal they had received. You heard them yesterday, they are so different! Their situation is the same, but they changed, they have a different gaze upon the situation, now they have been able to witness a position of freedom in front of the challenges of ‘being on training’ in front of severe sickness, suffering and death. What has happened? You heard them “While I was taking care of my patient I thought of what was said at the MedConference ‘follow the patient, follow reality and reality will tell you the way to go’ and I suddenly found a way to treat my patient”. They were also in touch with others, they have been asking for help. This is very important, one student told me that, although she has a very strong foundation in terms of faith and values, she found herself doing things she would have never chosen before because of the strength of the power surrounding her.

The discovery of the origin of this ‘impossible becoming possible’ is a suggestion for the method to continue. We said that there is an extraordinary strength in action within our companionship, therefore we need to continue to look for and to follow that strength. It is therefore a personal work, but in relationship. In a talk to nurses in 1985, Luigi Giussani (3) said “May the content of your work be a relationship with a friend”. This is our proposal.

Notes

1. <http://medicalconference.us/2009/>
2. E Parravicini. Why do we take care of others? A proposal. J Med Pers (2010) 8:1-2
3. Luigi Giussani (1922-2005) was the founder of the catholic movement of Communion and Liberation (<http://www.clonline.us/>)