

Southdown: A Place of Healing and Hope for Wounded Healers

Keynote address at the Southdown Institute Dinner

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Thank you for your warm introduction and the privilege of sharing some thoughts with you this evening on the very important and necessary work of the Southdown Institute. I have known about Southdown for many years and benefitted from the excellent educational work of its staff when I was director of formation and later a member of the General Council of my own religious congregation – the Basilian Fathers. Southdown's programs of vocational assessment and education of young religious are among the best programs in the Anglophone world. It is a pleasure to stand before Southdown benefactors and donors this evening and publicly acknowledge the very competent staff that has the good of the Church, her ministers and her people at heart.

This evening I wish to reflect on one of Pope Francis favorite images which has certainly entered our ecclesial vocabulary these past four years: the powerful image of the "field hospital." This expression is not unique to Francis, but is drawn from the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola. When Francis speaks of the church as a "field hospital after a battle," he appeals to Ignatius' understanding of the role of the church in light of God's gaze upon the world. A field hospital is the opposite image of a fortress under siege. The image of a church as a field hospital is not just a simple, pretty poetic metaphor; from it we can derive an understanding of both the church's mission and her sacraments of salvation. Field hospitals by their very nature indicate a battleground, a struggle, suffering, confusion, emergency, and they foster dialogue and encounter, conversation, accompaniment, consolation, compassion and the binding of wounds.

Southdown exists to care for committed and consecrated women and men working on the front lines in the field hospitals of our times: our parishes, schools, universities, Church institutions, programs and various ministries. We are those first responders who welcome God's people and try our best to accompany them, listen to their delights and disappointments, their struggles and suffering. We try to be for them like the Good Shepherd who offers consolation and comfort. We may write, talk and expound about life's theories until the end of time but unless we imitate the One who is the source of our lives, we are noisy gongs and clanging symbols. That One is Jesus Christ. If we claim to be his followers and ministers, his priests, religious women and men, then we must go where Jesus went and do what he did. We have to take upon ourselves, like the good Samaritan, the man or woman we encounter along the road, just as Jesus taught us on the pages of the New Testament. To be like Jesus we have to be close to people. Like Jesus we must eat with tax collectors and with sinners, forgive the woman caught in adultery, while admonishing her at the same time to sin no more. He wants us to welcome and respect foreigners and refugees, even those who are enemies or potential threats. And above all, Jesus' plea has been consistent: stop judging others.

Imitation of Jesus Christ means to be compassionate. Compassion literally means "to suffer with." Compassion is not simply a feeling or emotion that arises when we are confronted with another's suffering and thus feel motivated to relieve that suffering. Compassionate people put a human face on suffering. Compassionate people do not blame others for their misfortunes, accidents, sins, crimes and errors. People who are down and out know immediately if there is true interest and authentic compassion on the part of the other person taking care of them.

Yet in the process of being compassionate ministers and healers and imitating the Good Shepherd, we may grow weary and tired along the way. We know only too well that we are weak, fragile and sinful persons. We discover things about ourselves that may frighten us and we may even harm others, causing them to doubt their own faith. Each of us who serves on the front lines in the field hospitals of the Church is also a wounded healer. "Wounded healer" is a term created by the Jewish psychologist Carl Jung. The idea states that an analyst is compelled to treat patients because the analyst himself is "wounded". This concept finds its origins in Greek mythology. There the centaur Chiron was a "wounded healer", after being poisoned with an incurable wound by one of Hercules' arrows. Research has shown that a high percentage of counselors, psychotherapists and pastoral ministers have experienced some wounding experiences leading to their career choice.

A large part of healing occurs in the telling and sharing of our stories. How powerful it is to meet someone who has been down the same path and is willing to listen. I have discovered over and over again that simply listening to others and sharing their experiences often strengthens others and gives them hope. The wounded healer par excellence is Jesus. He took on our humanity so that he might share our own human condition. He knew fear, loneliness and temptation. He even knew despair as he cried out from the cross, "My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?" Our Catholic tradition also counts among its saints many wounded healers.

Think of St. Paul who draws on his own struggles to deepen an understanding of moral battles. St. Thomas More battled fear and depression as he struggled to speak his conscience and speak the truth to the power of his day. St. Teresa of Calcutta struggled with the darkness of doubt. Such honesty deepens her credibility, especially to people like us who have doubts along our own journeys. When we encounter a saint who faced inner darkness and tried to build an edifice of compassion on those wounds, we feel and know that these are people we can approach.

How can we forget the famous psychiatrist Viktor Frankl who drew upon his experiences in the Nazi death camps to formulate logotherapy, one of the few psychotherapies that talks directly about suffering. Rabbi Harold Kushner drew upon his own family tragedy to write *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, a book that continues to help millions of people in the face of senseless suffering.

Three great examples of contemporary wounded healers are Bill Wilson, the man known as Bill W., cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous, who drew on his own addiction to build an organization that now helps addicts worldwide. His friendship and close collaboration with Dr. Bob and the Irish religious Sister Ignatia of the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine gave millions of people a new lease on life.

Wounded healers offer many things: knowledge, resources, and creative problem solving. But what they offer more than anything else is that most elusive, yet most important, spiritual and psychological experience: hope. This is why a place like Southdown Institute is so important, vital and necessary for the Church and for society today. Southdown exists to restore hope and offer healing to the Church's first responders and field hospital workers, so that they in turn may offer hope and healing to the world.

The three pillars and virtues of the Christian life are faith, hope, and charity. In my experience, hope is the greatest and most difficult of these virtues. Hope becomes even more urgent as we see the world around us so divided and in such disarray. I believe that the most important thing we priests and religious can do for others is to encourage them not to lose hope. Without hope, there is little motivation to face wounds, to heal, and to become the change that we wish to see around us. To encounter another human being who has given us hope to continue our journey is a grace and blessing. The role of the healer, of the pastoral minister, is to help others find the hope that is buried deep within them, in the midst of shadows, darkness and sadness. As Christians, we see ultimately that wounded healers don't heal. The power to heal comes from a spiritual source and that each one of us has the potential to connect with that source.

Allow me share a final thought with you this evening. I have had the privilege of knowing Pope Francis and seeing him up close in action. He has a propensity toward those on the peripheries of life, to the suffering and downcast, to those who have been rejected in so many ways by society and by their fellow human beings. What moves me most about being in his presence, speaking with him and learning from him is his utter humanity, his normalcy and his contagious joy. He has spoken publicly about his own moments of darkness and sadness. He identified himself as "a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon." He is a great wounded healer who has transformed his own doubts and struggles into profound gestures of compassion and solidarity with others. He understands the human condition, he knows about human psychology and has given hope to millions and millions of people because he knows who he is and he is free.

When one is free as Pope Francis is, that person also sets others free to be the person who they are meant to be. Pastoral ministers who are free imitate the Lord whom they strive to serve. That is the mission of Southdown, to heal field hospital workers and set them free, that they in turn might heal and free others.

There is a moving story about Pope Francis in the sixth chapter of his long interview in the book: *The Name of God is Mercy*. When Francis was a parish priest in Argentina, he met a mother with young children who had been abandoned by her husband. She had no steady income. When odd jobs were scarce, she would prostitute herself in order to feed her children and provide for her family. During that time, she would visit the local parish, which tried to help her by offering food and material goods. One day during the Christmas season the mother visited and requested to see the Jesuit parish priest, Padre Jorge Mario Bergoglio. He thought she was going to thank him for the Christmas food basket the parish had sent to her.

"Did you receive the basket?" Padre Jorge had asked her.

"Yes, yes, thank you for that, too," the mother explained. "But I came here today to thank you because you never stopped calling me Señora."

This experience with the young mother profoundly touched Padre Jorge, who said it taught him the importance of treating every human person with dignity and mercy, no matter their situation in life. *"Experiences like this teach you how important it is to welcome people delicately and not wound their dignity,"* Pope Francis stated in the little book.

I am sure that Padre Jorge's and later Pope Francis' compassionate responses to so many people are due to his own good sense of himself. He is a sinner whom the Lord looked upon. He is a wonderful wounded healer who is healing a broken world. He is not afraid of being human and of accompanying people on the journey. Pope Francis explained in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*: "Someone good at such accompaniment does not give in to frustrations or fears. He or she invites others to let themselves be healed, to take up their mat, embrace the cross, leave all behind and go forth ever anew to proclaim the Gospel" (EG, 172).

Southdown provides a safe place of healing for wounded healers. It reminds us that there is always more to learn about being of help to others. Those who have passed through Southdown often become compassionate healers for the people they serve. They often become ministers who understand that all is gift and that gratitude is the hallmark of their ministry. They rediscover their mission to heal wounded hearts, to open doors, to free people, and to say that God is good, God forgives all, and that God is a God of tenderness and mercy. They often learn to call others "Señora, Señor..." and reverence the dignity of all to whom they minister.

With the declining numbers in the Church, religious and clergy, there are less of us to do more work. The contemporary challenges are immense. The workload is staggering at times. We understand the stress, the risk of burnout, what it means to multitask. By providing a holistic response to critical mental health needs of church ministers in an environment attentive to the action of God in each of our lives, Southdown helps to create healthy communities where clergy, religious men and women can creatively address problematic concerns, and come to know the truth of Jesus' desire that all "might have life and have it to the full."

May God bless all who work at Southdown Institute, and all those who have benefitted and continue to benefit from this important institute of healing and hope. May the Lord reward all of you here and many others who believe in Southdown and thus allow it to continue its mission.

***Basilian Father Thomas Rosica is the founding CEO of the Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation, Canada's National Catholic Television Network. Salt and Light Television produced the first documentary on the work of the Southdown Institute in 2016.**
<http://southdown.on.ca/news-resources/southdown-videos/>