

15th Consultation
European Network of Health Care Chaplaincy
Belgium, Blankenberge, 15-19 June 2018



LECTURES

Nurturing Spirituality in Healthcare Chaplaincy



Called to the impossible: Stubborn and challenging Biblical narratives and the reflection on healthcare chaplaincy

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Today chaplains have become sophisticated in the understanding and practice of pastoral care. They have picked up the language of the consultation room. They know of neuroses and phobias, of guilt complexes and depression, displacement and projection, On their shelves one can find no longer only books on theology, but also a growing collection of books on psychotherapy and statistics. Probably, one can also find a Bible on that shelf. But do chaplains still read the Book?

Today, the role of the Bible in pastoral counseling is a controversial issue. Questions as: Does one use the Bible during counseling? If so, under what conditions? For, one can easily imagine situations in which the use of the Bible would be felt as inappropriate. Therefore, some argue that the Bible is not very relevant at all to problems within the field of pastoral counseling. Others, however, argue that the role of the Bible in pastoral counseling should not be overt and should be limited to the role of inspiring and informing the chaplain, rather than the pastoral counseling. But if it does, how might this occur? Does one have to allow the Bible to guide one's thoughts? Or does the Bible inform counseling in a more systematic or structured way? In books and articles on this topic there is a lot of consensus that the Bible still has to play a role in pastoral counseling, but there is little agreement about how to understand its role.

From a philosophical-hermeneutical point of view, I will argue that the Bible still has the power to nurture the chaplain's spirituality and the field of practical theology. However, I do not understand its role as 'a guide', nor as 'an instructor'. I'm convinced that the Bible functions as a critical and stubborn dialogue partner in our care for the narrative of patients. I will introduce the audience into the 'normativity of the future' approach (R. Bieringer & M. Elsbernd, 2010). This approach emphasizes that the biblical text unfolds an alternative world that still needs to be realized. The text offers a new, future world as God has intended and becomes in that way relevant and appealing for the reader today. I will start my reflection with an encounter I had with a young mother on the neonatology intensive care unit of the University Hospitals Leuven, who was going to lose her baby. Raising narratives such as the raising of the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5,21-24.35-43) put us in a 'perspective of the impossible'. The 'normativity of the future' approach will enable me to develop a reading in which this 'perspective of the impossible' functions as a hermeneutical key to understand the Gospel's message and our vulnerable, human condition.