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Faith and
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The importance of our mental health has been highlighted widely in recent years. This is a welcome and necessary development. Professional voices from psychology, psychiatry and medicine have all argued for increasing awareness of the importance of mental health and the need for greater support structures to help people with mental health problems. One body who has still to find their voice on this crucial topic is the Church. This is lamentable for the wisdom of the Gospel and faith Tradition of the Church have much light to shed on the topic of mental health. Here I offer ten ways in which Christian faith contributes to a sound mental health, prefaced with three important caveats.

The first of these caveats points out the obvious, namely that having faith does not immunize us from mental health problems – as we see in the lives of people like St Louis Martin (1823-1894 - father of St Therese of Lisieux), St Benedict Joseph Labre (1748-1783) and Fr Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889).¹ Second, not every mental illness has a spiritual cause so having weak faith or no faith is not necessarily the cause of poor mental health. Third, religious or spiritual therapy is never a substitute for medical treatment of mental illnesses. Mental health is best served by a wholistic care of the whole person's body, mind and spirit. That said, while spiritual therapy is never a substitute for medical intervention, neither can medical intervention, on its own, be sufficient. Any materialistic reduction of the human person is not consistent with how we understand who God created us to be. With these caveats in mind, the following points try to show how faith can be an invaluable resource in improving and sustaining our mental health.

The first and most basic message of the Christian faith is its pronouncement that we are accepted and loved unconditionally by God. As St John reminds us 'God is Love' (1 Jn. 4:8). Christians

¹ It is well known that all three suffered with mental health issues despite a heroic faith.

THE FURROW

believe that God loving us does not depend on us earning that love by anything we do. This is the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ and continually offered to all in every place and time. Here is a positive, hopeful and transformative truth that directly addresses the human need to be loved and to love in return.

This experience of being loved unconditionally and empowered to love in return is essential for our emotional lives and mental health. Here is an inexhaustible source of self-esteem and positive energy that cannot be replicated by our own efforts and that awaits broken humanity. It means that no matter how alone I feel or how desperate I become, the love of a God who knows me and accepts me is ever present. Closely related to this truth is that God has made us in his own image and likeness. This means that there is an innate goodness in all of us that is beautiful and sacred. In the words of St Catherine of Siena, God has fallen in love with what he himself has made.² Through faith and baptism, we have become children of God our Father who possess the goodness and beauty of God himself. As we endure any difficulty, mental or physical, ‘nothing can separate us from the love of God, known to us in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Rom. 8:39)

The second and related resource of our faith is that it declares us to be someone, helping us understand ourselves in relation to another. Our encounter with Christ reveals who we are and confers an identity as beloved children of God. This frees us from the anxiety of trying to understand ourselves only in relation to ourselves. According to St Bonaventure: ‘I know myself better in God than in myself’.³ For St Catherine of Siena, we cannot be our own interpreters for ‘we can see neither our own dignity nor the defects which spoil the beauty of our soul, unless we look at ourselves in the peaceful sea of God’s being in which are imaged’.⁴ The Second Vatican Council taught that ‘it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of humanity truly becomes clear’.⁵ In a direct challenge to modern attempts to define ourselves in isolation from the Creator, Pope Benedict XVI taught that ‘without God, man neither knows which way to go, nor even understands who he is’.⁶

2 ‘You eternal God, saw me and knew me in yourself. And because you saw me in your light, you fell in love with your creature, drew her out of yourself and created her in your image and likeness’. St Catherine of Siena, ‘You saw me in Yourself’ in M. O’Driscoll, ed., *Catherine of Siena: Passion for the Truth; Compassion for Humanity. Selected Spiritual Writings*, New City Press, New York 2005, 73.

3 *Hexameron*, 12, 9.

4 ‘Look at Yourself in the Water’ in M. O’Driscoll, ed., *Catherine of Siena: Passion for the Truth; Compassion for Humanity. Selected Spiritual Writings*, 36.

5 *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

6 *Caritas in Veritate*, 78.

The Gospel frees us from the burden of being self-referential and the confusion of not knowing who we are, where we have come from or where we are going. For the person of faith, everything unfolds along the journey of life that we walk as fellow pilgrims, empowered with the fundamental truth of our identity as God's beloved children, brothers and sisters in Christ and destined to share eternal life with him.

The third resource provided by faith is the gift of meaning. There is broad evidence that a lack of meaning in human lives impacts negatively on mental health. According to psychiatrist Andrew Simms: 'Lack or loss of meaning in life is probably the most frequent spiritual symptom voiced by our patients'.⁷ This point was powerfully argued by Victor Frankl in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* where he observed those who had the best chance of surviving the horrors of Auschwitz were those who could find meaning in their suffering. With Nietzsche, Frank argued that 'the person who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how.' Having survived the war, Frankl went on to develop a therapy known as 'Logotherapy' based on helping people find meaning in their lives and reasons to live. Not everyone would agree that such meaning exists. For many contemporary atheists, there is no God and therefore no meaning. For Jean Paul Sartre: 'Here we sit, all of us, eating and drinking to preserve our precious existence and really there is nothing, nothing, absolutely no reason for existing'.⁸ Similarly for Richard Dawkins, 'the universe has no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference'.⁹ But if life has no meaning then the human mind inevitably begins to question - what is there to live for? What is the meaning of my existence? As Andrew Simms testifies from his experience as a psychiatrist: 'Profound suffering in the lives of many with mental illness is caused by a feeling of meaninglessness'.¹⁰

The Gospel insists that life has meaning and that every human life is meaningful. In the words of Cardinal Newman 'God has created me to do him some definitive service; he has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have my mission'. In a Lecture published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, Prince Charles said: 'I believe that the most urgent need for Western man is to rediscover that divine element in his being,

7 A. Sims, *Is Faith Delusion? Why Religion is Good for your Health*, Continuum, London 2009, 46.

8 J.P. Sartre, *Nausea*, New York Directions Publishing, 1964, 112.

9 R. Dawkins, *River out of Eden: A Darwinian view of life*, Basic Books, New York 1995, 133.

10 A. Sims, *Is Faith a Delusion?*, 215.

THE FURROW

without which there never can be any possible hope or meaning to our existence in this earthly realm'.¹¹

A fourth and basic affirmation of Christianity is that every human experience has been touched and transformed by the God who became human. This includes depression and mental illness. In the words of St John Paul II: 'Christ took all human suffering on himself, even mental illness...This affliction configures the sick person to Christ and gives him/her a share in his redeeming passion'.¹² From the Gospels, we see when and how Jesus suffered from mental anguish. He grieved when the disciples could not understand him (Matt. 17:17; Mark 9:19; Luke 9:41). He wept at the death of his friend Lazarus (John 11:35) and over Jerusalem, the city of David that would reject him (Luke 19:41). With his agony in the garden, he cried out in mental anguish - 'my soul is sorrowful unto death' (Matt. 26:38; Mark 14:34) - a distress so great that it caused his sweat to fall to the ground like great drops of blood. At the height of his torment on the cross, he cried out in despair: 'My God my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34).

With the mental suffering of Jesus, God did not take away mental agony but filled it with his presence. Our God does not console us by abolishing anguish of the mind but by entering it and sharing it. United to us in our darkness, Jesus invites those of tortured mind to transcend the darkness with him towards the light of resurrection. By embracing humanity, sorrow and mental pain are no longer foreign to God but have been taken up into his life to be transformed into hope. For those who suffer in their minds, they have a friend and refuge in the sorrowful heart of Jesus in whose suffering they participate. Yet, Christ did not just experience sorrow but teaches about it - 'Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted' (Matt. 5:5; Luke 6:21). With the beatitudes Jesus teaches the paradox that in order to experience blessedness it is essential to mourn - to mourn what we lack, what we have lost and what we will never have. No one can have everything and there is a freedom in accepting that. Having much and trying to feel good all the time does not guarantee peace of mind. Feelings come and go but the blessedness Jesus speaks of is a more permanent state that leads to gratitude, harmony and joy.

A fifth resource of faith is the transforming power of negative experiences like sin and betrayal. Because of original sin,

11 HRH The Prince of Wales, (1991), 150th Anniversary Lecture, *British Journal of Psychiatry* 159, 763-768.

12 John Paul II, *Address to Participants at the International Conference Sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health Care Workers*, 11th December 1996. Published in *L'Osservatore Romano*, (English edition), 11th December 1996.

human beings make mistakes, fail and love imperfectly. In our imperfection, at times we injure each other, leaving us wounded and in need of healing. Being wronged or hurt gives rise to strong emotions of anger and disappointment which, if not acknowledged and addressed, can lead to depression and other mental health problems.

In the Gospels, forgiveness is a core teaching. Jesus Christ reveals a merciful God who desires to forgive sins and heal wounds caused by human failings. This is the same forgiveness with which he empowers us to forgive ourselves and each other (Matt. 18:21-35). With his forgiveness we are unburdened from guilt, self-loathing and shame. We see this with the Apostles Peter and Paul who both failed Christ but who did not remain paralysed by their failings. Rather they were transformed by Christ's mercy and by his renewed faith in them after they had fallen. With God's forgiveness that we have received and extend to others, we are freed from anger and bitterness and other emotionally destructive feelings such as hatred and revenge. Our faith also enables us to distinguish between the sin and the sinner – to forgive the wrong done to us without denying the wrong that was committed. Gordon Wilson, St John Paul II and Nelson Mandela are among those people who were seriously wronged at some point in their lives but who learned to forgive in ways that have inspired millions.¹³

A sixth resource that comes with faith is the support it provides through community. Much depression and mental health problems are made worse by isolation and feeling we are suffering alone. To illustrate the point, it is known that there are higher rates of depression among those who are separated, divorced or alienated from friends and family.¹⁴ The problem is so acute that governments are taking action. In January this year, British Prime Minister Theresa May announced the appointment to her cabinet of a 'Minister of Loneliness' to tackle a sad reality of modern life, namely the isolation of so many people. This problem is not confined to Britain but is endemic in much of Western society.

Christians believe in a God of relationship - of Father, Son and Holy Spirit who share a life of communion and love. Faith draws us into that communion of love, uniting us to God and to others who share that relationship with us. Here is the spirituality of communion which 'means an ability to think of our brothers and

¹³ Gordon Wilson lost his daughter Marie in a bomb attack at Enniskillen in 1987. He offered forgiveness to those responsible. John Paul II visited Mehmet Ali Agca in prison to offer him forgiveness for having shot him on 13th May 1981. Following his release from prison in 1990, Nelson Mandela embarked on a mission of forgiveness and reconciliation when he became president of South Africa in 1994.

¹⁴ See A. Kheriaty, *The Catholic Guide to Depression*, Sophia Institute Press, New Hampshire 2012, 28.

THE FURROW

sisters in faith within the profound unity of the ‘Mystical Body’ and therefore as those who are part of me’.¹⁵ For all Christian Churches, a sense of welcome and belonging is fundamentally important along with the provision of times and spaces where people can meet, befriend each other and provide mutual support and encouragement. Here is the essence of parish and community life at the local level. Key to this common life is a spirituality of communion which connects us to both God and our fellow pilgrims who support us as we support them. Just as disturbance of relationship is a central feature of many mental health problems, so friendship, support and community are important contributors to a positive and healthy mind. Church communities can be and indeed should be places where people with mental health problems feel accepted and supported in the same way the community supports people with any other illness

A seventh dimension of mental health that faith illuminates is the link between leading a virtuous life and the experience of happiness. How we act effects how we feel. Before Christianity, Plato made this connection as he argued that justice is always happiness.¹⁶ For St Augustine, happiness is more than a feeling but is always linked to the truth: ‘the happy life is joy based on the truth. This is joy grounded in you, O God, who are the truth’.¹⁷ For St Thomas Aquinas, all the prescriptions and prohibitions of the Gospel are ordered to our joy.¹⁸ Here is the invitation to order our lives along the domains of justice, truth, peace and love as the gateway to authentic happiness.

The Christian Tradition also insists that our conscience is a mechanism that teaches us what to avoid and what are the right choices to make. The conscience can distinguish which actions will bring sadness and which will bring joy. For St Ignatius of Loyola, when we make bad choices we must welcome the prick of conscience and note the misery that sin produces. This desolation is purifying.¹⁹ In this light, not all guilt is negative. It is like pain to the body, telling us something is wrong. As Pope Pius XII taught: ‘Guilt is the consciousness of having violated a higher law, by which, nevertheless, one recognises himself as being bound, a consciousness which can find expression in suffering and psychic disorder’.²⁰

15 Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43

16 Plato, *The Republic*, Book 2, 358a in A. Bloom (trans.), *The Republic of Plato*, Basic Books, New York 1991, 36.

17 *Confessions*, 10, 22, 33.

18 *Summa Theologiae*, q. 99

19 *Spiritual Exercises*, First Week.

20 *Address to the Fifth International Congress on Psychotherapy and Clinical Psychology*, April 13, 1953.

There is a strong argument that this link between morality and mental health is most neglected and ignored in public debate on the issue. However, if we are serious about treating the root causes of mental health problems then we cannot avoid the evidence that links virtue to happiness and vice to misery. Honesty forces us to acknowledge the reality of sin which is the deadliest sort of pathology since it attacks the soul and drains its joy.²¹ In the words of one Catholic psychiatrist: ‘Much mental distress or disorder, including some cases of depression, are caused or sustained by a person’s trying to live a series of contradictions’.²² So while the confessional was never meant to be a cure for neuroses or mental health problems, it can be argued that the couch was never meant to absolve sin which is what people need as much as clinical treatment if their mental problems are being caused by moral conflicts. As Pope Pius XII wisely advised, there comes a time when ‘the doctor should direct his patient towards God and to those who have the power to remit the fault itself in the name of God’.²³

The eighth resource provided by Christian faith is that of right order. Emotional well-being comes from having right order in our lives. For Augustine, peace comes from *tranquillitas ordinis*...the tranquillity of order.²⁴ Aquinas developed this idea by referring to the *ordinis caritas* – that all things in our lives do not exist on the same level but need to be ordered in right priority if happiness is to be ours.²⁵ First is to love and worship God, then family and friends. The more our lives are rightly ordered, the more the boundaries of the self are firm and clear with a stronger locus of self-control.

Research reveals a significant, positive relationship between religious belief and this internal locus of control.²⁶ Christianity calls us to be free and responsible. It provides a foundation for a person’s life of love of God and neighbour and can provide a moral compass that directs our actions. Experience also shows that this proper order in our lives can easily be disrupted. The lower parts of the soul (emotions and appetites) rebel against the higher parts (intellect and will). Human thinking, willing and feeling become fragmented. This then spills over into fragmented and disordered relationships. If temperance is not part of our lives

21 *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes envy, one of the traditional seven deadly sins, as a sadness. CCC 2540.

22 A. Kheriaty, *The Catholic Guide to Depression*, 172.

23 *Address to the Fifth International Congress on Psychotherapy and Clinical Psychology*, April 13, 1953.

24 *City of God*, 19.

25 See A. Kheriaty, *The Catholic Guide to Depression*, 176-177.

26 See L.E. Jackson – R.D. Coursey, ‘The Relationship of God control and internal locus of control to intrinsic religious motivation, coping and purpose in life’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 27, (1988), 399-410.

then disordered passions can compromise our freedom, leading to destructive addictions and compulsions which cause misery. For Christians, the commandments and the Beatitudes are not just laws but blueprints for the happiness God wishes us to enjoy. They are antidotes to chaos, slavery and the key to a well ordered life which leads to blessedness and peace. That is why the Psalmist could write: ‘Had your law not been my delight, I would have perished in my misery’ (Ps. 119:92).

A ninth resource that comes from Christian faith is the practise of prayer, ritual and rites of passage. Viewing the experience of life as a pilgrimage, along that journey there are key moments that need to be marked and celebrated. This need is acknowledged by other faith traditions such as Judaism and Islam and indeed by many cultures whether they include a faith dimension or not.²⁷ The prayer and sacramental life of the Church is rich in marking the passage of time, the rhythms of life and the transition from one state of life to another. These include birth (baptism), moving into adulthood (Confirmation), marriage and death (funeral rites). A wide tapestry of prayers, rites and rituals mark whatever transition is being undergone by individuals and communities. These are generally viewed as positive and even necessary expressions to the lived realities we experience. These can be moments that are therapeutic, healing and have a positive impact on our mental health and well-being.

As evidence for this, in a major study of American women, it was discovered that Catholic women aged 30 to 55 who participate in Eucharist at least weekly are up to 20 times less likely to commit suicide than women who never attend religious services.²⁸ In relation to prayer, there is proof that contemplative or meditative practises have wide ranging health benefits that combat depression and anxiety.²⁹ When we pray we give expression to gratitude which mitigates against self-pity, narcissistic tendencies and pride.³⁰ Prayer is about communication with an accessible God who assures us we are not alone. So, for example, the psalms offer a vocabulary and grammar to give voice to emotional sorrow and pain: ‘My heart pounds within me death’s terrors fall upon me. Fear and trembling overwhelm me; shuddering sweeps over me’ (Ps. 55); ‘I am withered, dried up like grass, too wasted to eat my

27 The anthropological roots of rites of passage have been studied by Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1969.

28 ‘Association Between Religious Service Attendance and Lower Suicide Rates Among US Women’, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Aug 1, 2016, 73(8), 845-851.

29 See A. Kheriaty, *The Catholic Guide to Depression*, 179.

30 For more on the benefits of gratitude see R. Emmons, *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude can make you happier*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York 2007.

food' (Ps. 102). With Job many can cry: 'I will not restrain my mouth ...I will complain in the bitterness of my soul' (Job. 7:11). But having grappled with despair, in God's Word we also discover hope – 'For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for peace and not disaster, to give you a future and a hope' (Jer. 29:11). In the end sorrow and pain will be overcome (Cf. Is. 35:10; 51:11).

The tenth resource is that Christian faith is a wellspring of hope without which the human spirit disintegrates. Evidence for this comes from the studies of a psychiatrist who carried out a long term study of 800 suicidal patients to determine which risk factors were most closely linked to suicide. The most dangerous factor he identified was their sense of hopelessness.³¹

Many believers who suffer from mental illness testify that had it not been for the hope that comes from their Christian faith, they may not have survived. Countless people of faith have seen in their suffering the seeds of a future of hope - that the sorrow they experience will give way eventually to joy: 'You will be sorrowful but your sorrow will turn to joy' (Jn. 16:20). This is not a form of wishful thinking that consoles us in present misery but a real act of faith that sees mental suffering as a participation in Christ's mental anguish that precedes a participation in new life in the future and a call to embrace a deeper love in the present. For the Christian, the Gospel gives us hope and gives life a trajectory towards that definitive future. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI: 'the present, even if it is arduous, can be lived and accepted if it leads towards a goal'. For this reason 'the one who has hope lives differently'.³² Unlike many other root causes of physical and mental illnesses, there is no prescription or medical cure for a lack of hope. The only hope for a lack of hope is supernatural – the theological virtue of hope which can be infused only by God's grace that comes with faith.

In conclusion, according to psychiatrist Andrew Sims, 'the advantageous effect of religious belief and spirituality on mental and physical health is one of the best kept secrets in psychiatry and medicine generally'.³³ This essay has sought to tease out ten advantageous effects of Christian faith for mental health – God's unconditional love that is available to all; that God's love confers on us a basic identity that reveals who we are; that faith is a source of meaning; that every human experience including mental anguish has been assumed and redeemed by God in Christ; with faith in Christ comes the power of forgiveness and the power to forgive;

31 See A. Kheriaty, *The Catholic Guide to Depression*, 99.

32 *Spe Salvi*, 1.

33 A. Sims, *Is Faith a Delusion?*, Preface, xi.

THE FURROW

being drawn into a supportive faith community where we are not alone; that faith highlights the link between living a virtuous life and a healthy mind; that faith moves us towards the right order necessary for peace and tranquillity; with Christian faith comes a life of prayer and ritual, essential for mental health and well-being; that Christian faith brings hope that lifts the spirit towards new horizons. My hope is that this paper will lead to a new awareness in the Church of the benefits of faith to mental health and a renewed confidence to contribute confidently to this important debate.

Food for thought. In the prevailing culture, priority is given to the outward, the immediate, the visible, the quick, the superficial and the provisional. What is real gives way to appearances. In many countries globalisation has meant a hastened deterioration of their own cultural roots and the invasion of ways of thinking and acting proper to other cultures which are economically advanced but ethically debilitated.

- POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Dublin: Veritas, 2013, par. 62.