

acquisition and maintenance in good physical, mental and social wellbeing of what permits us to be and to bring about what we aspire to.

For that again, health is not static. It is better defined as a long lasting work of balancing between the physical and mental resources at our disposal on the one hand, and the aggressions to which we are subjected (by pathological factors, social pressures, breakdown of the organism...) on the other hand. Every age and every situation puts a different face on our health and on our infirmity. There is no applying the same criteria to know if a 20-year old is fit or an 80-year is well.

It is good that we take care of our health. It is good for each one personally, it is good for the community where we live and it is indeed truly beneficial for the mission to which we have been called.

The care of our health requires effort, wisdom and a good discipline of one's life. A sober control over what we consume (food, drink, drugs); a commitment to physical exercise that is frequent and proportioned; a good ecology in the management of our work, of our worries and of our relationships, space to rest, and a regular medical check-up.

It is frightening at times to grasp the neglect into which we can fall with respect to caring for our health. A mental and spiritual laziness can bring us to the point of being numbed into a sedentary way of life, or into destructive consumption of tobacco or alcohol, or into bad eating habits. Personal hygiene can fall apart, as much physical as it is mental. In certain cases, we can cushion a certain self-destructiveness, and because we find no meaning in being alive, we hunker down in cynicism and frustration. Also there can be a beating up of oneself with work where there's not an authentic apostolic zeal to serve, but an anxiety to justify one's existence by one's own works.

The **Good Father**, always attentive to the needs of the brothers wrote to Father Stanislas Caupert who was tired out and sick from too much work: "*Our life has to be lived completely for God but we have to see that this life endures.*" (Troyes, December 20, 1824 LEBP 1000).

The lack of proper care of our own health almost always leads to the development of unhealthy relationships with members of the community and with other persons.

So it is appropriate to be attentive to one's health not to break the fifth commandment "*do not kill,*" (Exodus 20:13). Or said positively: take care of the life that you have been given. And make that life more agreeable with others! One of the current challenges of religious life is to make it clear that it is a sane way of life, that is to say, a help in developing healthy personal relationships. And it is not, as sometimes it seems to be, a structure in which persons and relations become messed up and sick.

Let us also be attentive not to fall into the other extreme: **obsessively worrying about our own health.** It seems that this is a frequent deviation in celibate persons for they do not have the reference of the biological timing of the succession of generations (see children and grandchildren growing up) would be particularly tempted to strive for the conservation of an impossible eternal state of youth.

The obsession for health indicates also such a fear of dying that the hope of an eternal life, it would be said, has vanished into thin air.

Many religious, even young ones, no longer make themselves available to go to new places or to assume certain tasks for health reasons. They fear that the food or climate will make them sick, they do not want to be distant from their regular medical doctor, unable to leave their customary ways, believe that tiredness will do them damage. Sometimes the list of what they will need -special foods, extra breaks, frequent check-ups...- is so long that communal life becomes complicated, engagement with the poor is neglected, and the energy of apostolic zeal is lost.

*"The devil wants to make us think that everything may damage us and cause us to lose our health," says **St Teresa of Jesus** in her usual graceful way inviting her sisters not to be obsessed about the care of the body. "Now that I am not so concerned about myself, I have much better health," (Libro de la Vida XIII, 7).*

The care of the body is very important, certainly. However, physical health is not an absolute value and can be subordinated to more important goals. In reality, the true health is that which permits us to achieve what we desire. If what we desire are wants enlightened by the Gospel, we will have motives for which our bodily health -even our life- would merit being sacrificed. This Jesus did, this Damien did. Thus many fathers and mothers have put their health on the line, all done to give their children a good start in life...or so many missionaries who accept infirmities, undernourishment, and the lack of services to serve in poor and dangerous places....

What would be the causes in this moment for which I would be willing to risk my health?

Our aim is not to make ourselves feel good taking the largest bite, but to go as deeply as we can into the love of Jesus and his Father. Putting all our energies in self-care can lead to a dead end. What gives life and true health is dedicating ourselves to serve as Jesus has asked us. This is why the best way to care for ourselves is **to care for others**.

The concrete love for those who are suffering bodily infirmity, hunger or other kinds of pain (cf. Mt 25:34-40) can help very much to free us from preoccupation with our own physical wellbeing. Isaiah the prophet says: *"Do not turn your back on your own flesh ...and your wound shall quickly be healed,"* (Isaiah 58:7-8) Serving others is the most healthy way to go although on occasion it will hurt, tire us out, and physically break us. May the service of others land us up at the end of each day happily tired and that our health would be worn down in the concrete exercise of loving.

Likewise the loving contemplation of **Christ crucified**, man of sorrows, disfigured and without beauty (Isaiah 53:2-3) will be the secret that permits us, not in anguish but in hope, to attend to the gradual diminishment of our own body.

Those who are strong, young, active and healthy heed the invitation of Pope Francis in the Chrism Mass of this past Holy Thursday: *"Please let us ask for the grace how to be weary, but weary in the best of ways!"*

And you brothers old and infirm, upon whom falls most heavily the burden of disabilities and illness, show us that peace and joy do not depend on physical forces and that true health is that which leads us to praise God with all that we are till we draw the final breath of our lives. Thanks.

Health and peace.

