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# What a Medical Student Seeks in a Catholic Medical School

Kevin L. Sullivan

*Dr. Sullivan, now at Evanston Hospital, Evanston, Ill., wrote this article while a student at Loyola University Stritch School of Medicine.*

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The initial question that I would like to address is: "Why does the Catholic Church need to have its own medical school?"

Certainly, the goal of all medical schools is to train competent physicians. However, the Catholic Church has unique goals which are included in the training of Catholic physicians. A Catholic medical school should give a student something more than technical wizardry. Its duty lies in dressing the body of knowledge in the clothing of moral principles.

One may ask, "What principles are important enough to teach a student with limited time for extra-medical education?" The truth is that these principles are not extra-medical. They must be intimately interwoven within the medical mind of the Catholic physician. I need not mention the vast expansion of medical capabilities within recent years. A medical student needs to be taught the ethical principles by which he can judge the proper use of the awesome tools of medical science.

Recent publicity concerning in vitro fertilization and the potential of cloning human beings poses difficult and serious moral problems. Issues such as these need to be studied in depth by the moral theologians of the Church. It is immediately obvious that the ethical investigation must precede the scientific capabilities, otherwise science would run unbridled by ethical principles. These principles must be elucidated in order that the questioning medical student may find answers.

The Catholic medical student seeks answers to ethical questions from Catholic medical schools. The latter have an obligation to answer these questions according to the doctrines of the Church.

There are a number of methods by which a Catholic medical school should teach its students. To begin with, the school should have a solid ethics course which corresponds to the teachings of the Catholic Church. An important question to ask at this point might be, "Where do we find the true teachings of the Catholic Church?" With situation

ethics as prevalent as it is today, it is entirely possible that a renegade pseudo-authority can be found in support of any belief. The correct source for securing information is the Magisterium of the Church, and is shown in her universal teachings throughout the ages.

This ethics course should include taking a stand on such issues as artificial contraception and abortion. Taking a stand on such controversial issues is not always an easy matter, but then, Christ never promised that standing up for what is right would be easy. This is the cross which He asks some physicians and His medical schools to bear.

The faculty of a Catholic medical school plays an integral role by building on the foundation of the formal ethics course. Primarily, the faculty members must show a good example by involving ethical judgments in their practice of medicine. In order to accomplish this, the physicians need to be well informed. In addition to showing their sincere concern and interest in the ethical aspects of medicine, they have an obligation to instruct the developing students in these areas. To insure that the medical students are instructed according to the beliefs of the Catholic Church, it is necessary that the majority of the faculty be Catholic. Certainly, we would not want to exclude a physician with a brilliant mind from our staff on the grounds that he was not a recipient of the gift of grace. However, it is necessary that these non-Catholic physicians understand the prohibitions against their espousing beliefs contrary to the Catholic faith.

### Let Physicians Stand Mute

These physicians should be permitted to stand mute on certain ethical issues. We do not intend for them to betray their own consciences, as this would be immediately and obviously wrong. Some physicians, in good conscience, may feel obligated to state their beliefs even though they are contrary to official Catholic teachings.

We must understand the gravity of the situation in that they are teaching medical students and speaking under the aegis of a Catholic university. For this reason, these physicians should not remain on the faculty of a Catholic medical school.

I have discussed the obligation on the part of the faculty and the school in regard to the ethical training of Catholic medical students. Education is not a one-way street. Students have a serious obligation to recognize ethical questions and to seek their answers.

“Why is it important for Catholic medical students to have a Catholic background to their medical education?” If we truly believe that our Catholic faith contains the reasons, purpose, and truths of life, then we have an obligation to coordinate it into any field of endeavor. Our practice of medicine provides a unique responsibility for we are dealing with people at the most crucial moments in their lives.

Each Catholic medical student and Catholic physician, by his example, is in a position to affect his patients and society as a whole. An immeasurable amount of good can grow from one person standing up for what is right. The result of an entire institution standing firm, holding on to the truth and speaking out about it, would have an unimaginably good effect. This is what medical students need and should seek from their Catholic medical schools.

I have discussed what I think medical students should be taught in a Catholic medical school. My topic reads, "What a medical student seeks in a Catholic medical school." The topic has been altered to read what a medical student *should* seek.

The medical student is a unique being. Picture his life. He begins medical school after what many consider to be a grueling pre-med experience. He is then faced with a seemingly insurmountable body of knowledge to learn. Many, if not most medical students, believe themselves too busy to be concerned with the question of ethics. If they adhere to a relativist philosophy, learning the Catholic viewpoint on ethics is hardly necessary. Even if they are traditional absolutists, students may not know what they are missing. Before the door of knowledge has been opened for you, you are totally unaware of what is behind the door. This is the danger of having an ethical void within Catholic medical schools. A student does not know what he is missing until it is too late.

The media are an associated source of danger. A student cannot be quarantined from the media's point of view. He hears it constantly. If he does not hear the opposing viewpoint from a school which is Catholic in name, the student can be lulled into believing that there is no opposing view.

Similarly, if a Catholic school is weak in stating its viewpoint, as is so prevalent today in regard to abortion and artificial contraception, its students receive a clear message. "The Catholics do not feel strongly enough about these issues to state them with dignity and courage, so obviously they are not convinced. If they are not convinced, why should I be?"

### Federal Money Question Interesting

The question of federal money is an interesting one. It has often been stated that a Catholic medical school cannot be too dogmatic, for it could risk losing its federal funding. The question, in reality, is solved by the ordering of priorities. Does the Catholic Church derive significant benefit by partially funding a school which is effectively little different from a secular institution? I submit that it is more advantageous to fully fund a medical school and graduate 140 totally trained Catholic physicians each year.

This is a time when faith becomes important. The authorities of the Catholic medical school must stand up and be counted and have faith in God, that He will watch over the school.

Young people are attracted into the field of medicine by a vision. The physician is viewed as one who helps save lives and cure human beings in their moments of most desperate need. I would wager to say this is why all physicians entered medicine.

A change is occurring today. Some physicians are taking part in the antithesis of the ideal physician, the killing of the most innocent and the most helpless. This tragedy degrades our profession and the entire human family.

More than ever before there is a need for moral leadership among Catholic physicians to stem the tide and prevent evil from drowning countless souls.

I charge that Catholic medical schools must play a pivotal role in this process of training strong Catholic physicians.

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