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## To See or Not to See

Rev. James Swetnam, S.J.

*Father Swetnam gave this address Sept. 22, 1990 to the St. Louis Chapter of the Catholic Physicians' Guild.*

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It is not easy to practice medicine these days. True, the rewards are great. Physicians enjoy considerable prestige in United States society. And deservedly so. They work long hours, carry enormous responsibility, train years for their work, and spend much time keeping abreast of their fields, all the while keeping one eye on the malpractice factor. It is a rare person in the population at large who is intellectually and psychologically equipped to do all this and take it in stride. Not that all doctors are in immediate danger of canonization or worthy candidates to teach in medical school. But by and large the American doctor has every reason to be proud of what has been achieved as regards health care for the American people.

Are we enjoying a state of perfection in the health care of the American people? You and I know that we are not. Knotty problems await solution, problems involving economic factors as well as medical technique. Every day in this country well over one billion dollars are spent on health care. Is this money all well spent? Obviously not. But attention is being given these problems.

And what is the responsibility of United States medical professionals toward people outside our country? What is our obligation to help other countries less favored learn from us? What is our obligation to learn from other countries where health care has made impressive progress? These are problems well worth our attention. But time is not unlimited, and I would prefer to say something about the role of the United States medical professional as *seer*. I am concerned with Catholic medical professionals in this country and their obligation to help their fellow countrymen *see*. For all medical professionals who have been given the gift of faith have a responsibility — a responsibility to witness to our beliefs in such a way not only that others may be inspired to share our belief if God so wills, but especially that others may see in our faith-inspired insights the values which are inherent in the reality which God has made. One of the main functions of a Catholic medical professional is to act as a catalyst in the establishment of a set of non-sectarian values without which any society

cannot live a life worthy of the name.

### **Examples from Luke**

Let us take some examples from Luke. At Luke 7, 18-23, John the Baptist sends two messengers to Jesus to ask if He is the one to come, i.e., the Messiah, or if they are to await someone else. Note the number two: this is an official mission, manned by a number sufficient to stand up in a court of Law (Deuteronomy 19, 15). Jesus replies in terms of Isaiah 61 and 35 and indicates that His ministry is without limit as to person: no one, not even those marginalized by the Mosaic Law, are excepted. This is at the heart of the "Good News" — God's interest is for every human without exception. This is what the passage means for those of us who have faith. What can it mean for those who do not have faith, but who can learn from our example? That each and every human life is worthy of attention and love, that each life has its own inherent dignity no matter what the appearances, no matter what the attitude of the unthinking observer.

In the Acts of the Apostles 4, 32-35, Luke describes an idealized version of community life among the first believers. Apparently there was no obligation to sell private property and give the results to the community, otherwise the comments about Barnabas would not have been newsworthy. For us, as believing Catholics, the verses outlined the value of community life which has traditionally been associated with those who wish to follow Jesus with vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience in a community venture, i.e., in terms of what is known as "religious life" in the technical sense. What these verses can mean for those who do not have faith but who can learn from our example is the value of the common good. There is such a thing as the good which belongs to the group as a whole and which we are all aware of when it comes to practicalities like sewers and roads but which we tend to lose sight of when it comes to limits of tolerance for the sufferings of a common humanity: the street people we see all around us are an affront to what it means to live in community. And just as Catholic medical professionals should be more alert about the dignity of a human person who is marginalized by other observers, so Catholic medical professionals should be more aware of the affront to the common good which street people constitute because of the special sensibility to the common good which their faith enables them to have.

### **Deepest Level of Challenge**

Perhaps the deepest level at which Catholic medical professionals are challenged to act as seers is at the level of the resurrection of Jesus. What can we say that can capture adequately our belief in a body risen from the dead? And not merely risen from the dead, as the body of Lazarus was, but transformed and transfigured in a way which defies our experience. This is our faith, that "on the third day he rose again from the dead". We know

that those who witnessed the risen Jesus had difficulty in recognizing Him (Luke 24, 16). But this is our faith which has come to us from the apostles who, in Luke's Gospel and Acts, have the prime responsibility to witness to the risen Lord. This is the faith in which we gladly summon non-believers to share, for it is a faith in our eternal destiny. But short of that we can use our faith as the occasion to witness to something enormously important in the secular work in which we live: that our physical bodies are important. Indeed, that our physical bodies are parts of ourselves. We are not spirits who are in possession of some alien thing which we call a body, to be cut and hacked as we will. The body which we "possess" is us ourselves. What happens to it is terribly important, because what happens to it happens to us. We are it, in part. Our body is an object of honor no less than is our soul. Surely this should be part of the cultural awareness of every human, and it should be witnessed to by every Christian, in particular by every Christian in the medical profession. If we believe in the resurrection of Christ's body and of our own, we certainly must treat the body of each and every human with the utmost respect. To do so is not to use ethics where we should be using biology. To do so is to recognize that ethics applies to the entire me, and my body is a part of that me. My body is not an appendage of myself, a joke, to be played with and used at my whim. My body is me, in part, and its destiny and all that goes into making up that destiny is enormously important. It is above all the Christian medical professional who, under the guidance of his faith in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, should see this.

So there you have three examples of how the Christian medical professional can act as a guide for the society in which he or she lives as a witness. There is no need normally to play fanfares, although fanfares should certainly not be ruled out as an occasional duty. It is simply a matter of undramatically doing one's duty day in and day out, based on seeing what is objectively there.

### Seeing Values

And this is what this whole process is about: seeing values where values are. It is not a matter of using my faith to impose values on reality where the values do not exist. It is not a matter of using my faith to see the human being as something of unique worth when the human being is nothing more than an animal. It is not a matter of inventing something and calling it the common good so as to give a sop to do-gooders of various persuasions. It is not a matter of imposing on the human body a worth which isn't there. Humans *are* unique in value; there *is* such a thing as the common good in human life; the body *is* precious precisely because it is human. And it is my faith which helps me see this. And it is my faith which makes me want to help others see this.

What we as Christian believers are asked to do is not to impose values on reality as a result of our beliefs, but to *see* values as a result of our beliefs.

Our faith should act as a catalyst, enabling us to understand well what otherwise we would understand either dimly or not at all. And I for one think this is enormously important, for if there is one sentence which can put in a nutshell our dilemma as technologists, it is that we are tempted to impose values on reality instead of discovering them. Something is technologically possible, therefore it is technologically good, and if it is technologically good, it is a value, it is something we should have. Our advancing control over the forces of nature leads us in our hubris to think that it is what we and we alone decide that really matters. In technology we have the force to impose on nature what we will, as we will, when we will. Therefore we have the right to do so.

Whatever one thinks of the environmental movement — and I think we can all point to reasons for having reservations in the matter — there is no denying that environmentalists have pointed out what is now accepted as an obvious truth by all thinking persons: we can wreck our environment, and even wreck it irretrievably, if we follow the principle that technological might means technological right. It has taken time for the environmentalists to get their point across, but they have succeeded. Nature does have laws with which even man, with all his power, tampers at his peril.

### **A Quarrel with Environmentalists**

I have a quarrel with the environmentalists. And my quarrel with them is not that they have gone too far. My quarrel with them is that they have not gone far enough. They have not extended their activity deeply enough nor widely enough. For the environmentalists should not stop at seals and whales and ozone holes. The environmentalists have all of reality as their province — not just flora and fauna and seas and skies but human bodies and human minds and the way societies operate — for there are laws lying within not just flora and fauna and seas and skies, but in human minds and human bodies and the ways societies operate. It is up to us to discover these laws and live accordingly. This does not mean that technology should become outmoded. Far from it. It means that with technology we have the means to collaborate effectively with nature so that nature can be what nature should be — the true servant of humans. And for nature to serve humans, humans must serve nature. Technology is not the enemy of humans, hubris is the enemy of humans. And the Catholic medical professional, from his or her privileged role as observer, should be a public seer in this regard.

What the Christian is doing who is using his faith to let nature manifest herself is putting into practice his belief that God made all things through His Word (John 1,2). It is God's Wisdom which lies beneath all reality, that Wisdom which in the language of revealed truth is Logos — that which is intelligence and hence, that which creates intelligibly. In discovering values instead of imposing them, the Christian is in reality letting God's wisdom manifest Himself. In following the leads of the Divine Wisdom in terms

understandable to his non-believing fellowmen and women, the Christian intellectual is rendering an enormous service to the world, for he is allowing the world to be itself. He is allowing the world the only way possible in which it can really be itself.

Whether we in the United States realize it or not, in the past generation we have reached a significant crossroads in our life together. As the consensus about the values which we had received from the past broke down and became rearranged we became more and more separated from the roots which gave such values strength. We have gained the pluses of the realization that racial segregation is civilly intolerable and that social security and unemployment insurance are matters of legitimate concern. But are these values which we have *imposed* on our society or matters which we have seen *grow out* of society because of the intrinsic value of each human person and the intrinsic value of the common good? On the other hand, we have allowed family life to become personalized and privatized to the extent that many people no longer see any social purpose in marriage. The life of a fetus is regarded by many as something which comes under the personal and private jurisdiction of the woman who carries it. Are these values imposed on reality or something which has grown out of our contemplation of reality? Is the ballot box the definitive answer?

### **Government Upholds Freedom**

The one overriding value which the United States government is sworn to uphold today is freedom. But freedom is not always reconcilable with the common good, and not just when someone cries "Fire" in a crowded theater. When does freedom emerge from reality and when is it imposed on reality at the expense of other values? How can the freedom enshrined in the present worship of maximum personal freedom be reconciled with the common good? How is a decision to be reached, by values imposed from without or values seen to come from within? This, in effect, is the task to which the Catholic intellectual is called along with other intellectuals of good will: to find the values by which we are to live along with the value of freedom as a community of humans worthy of the name.

Let no one plead for escape. It is so easy in a society where technology has given rise to problems to let technology be the pretext for escape. It is so easy to bury oneself in the intricacies of technology and let the larger issues sort themselves out. The larger issues will not sort themselves out. They have to be sorted out. And to sort them out requires vision. Christians have been given that vision of the world in which the world can truly become what it was destined to become at the hands of its Maker. But involvement and dialogue with all persons of good will are a must. One cannot remain a neuter in the war of values. One has to take sides. And it is the Catholic medical professional who, because of his or her faith, stands in a particularly advantageous position as one who can see and can care.