

February 1992

## "Contemporary Medical Issues - Discussed from a Catholic Moral and Ethical Perspective" An Address to the NFCPG Annual Convention October 12, 1991

Bernard Law

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Law, Bernard (1992) ""Contemporary Medical Issues - Discussed from a Catholic Moral and Ethical Perspective" An Address to the NFCPG Annual Convention October 12, 1991," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 59: No. 1, Article 10.  
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol59/iss1/10>



### **HIS EMINENCE BERNARD CARDINAL LAW**

**His Eminence is the new Episcopal Advisor to the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds. The son of a US Air Force colonel, His Eminence was born in Mexico in 1931. In 1961, he was ordained to the Priesthood. He was ordained Bishop of the Diocese of Springfield - Cape Girardeau, MO in 1973. Eleven years later, in 1984, he became Archbishop of Boston. In 1985, he was created Cardinal by Pope John Paul II.**

# **“Contemporary Medical Issues — Discussed from a Catholic Moral and Ethical Perspective”**

**An Address to the  
NFCPG Annual Convention**

**October 12, 1991**

**by**

**His Eminence  
Bernard Cardinal Law**

---

It is such a great pleasure for me to be here with you this evening. Earlier this year when I received an invitation to become the Episcopal Moderator of the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds, I hesitated. As Archbishop of Boston, there are so many demands on my time and attention, I was not at all sure that it would be prudent to assume another responsibility. However, considering the importance of the work of the guild, the critical role which Catholic Physicians have to play in our society, I could not but say yes, and am so very pleased to be working with you in this our common endeavor.

Catholic physicians find themselves in much the same position as did I. There are so many demands on your time and attention in the personal, family, Church, community and professional areas that it must be difficult to make the decision to participate in the activities of the Catholic Physicians' Guild. but you do so, I am sure, because of the importance which you find in this association. How necessary and good it is that the Church have an opportunity such as is provided by this organization to be able to reach out in a particular way in ministry to Catholic physicians. How good and necessary it is that you as Catholic Physicians, given the responsibilities which are yours, have the chance for special spiritual support and development, aimed at helping you understand better the vocation which is yours in the Church and the world, and drawing in a specific way from the spiritual resources of the Church in order that you might meet these challenges in a better way. How good and necessary it is that the Church can, through an organization such as the Catholic Physicians' Guilds, participate also in your professional development,

looking at critical current issues from the perspective of a Catholic moral point of view. Is this not a way in which you enable Christ to be present and to serve those whom he loves in this world, by means of the powers of modern medicine exercised through your hands?

This evening, looking at the theme for this Annual Meeting, "Contemporary Medical Issues — Discussed from a Catholic Moral and Ethical Perspective," I would like to focus with you on that last word, "perspective." What does your Catholic faith add to your professional competence by way of "perspective?" What does your Catholic faith offer by way of perspective on the context in which you carry on your medical service?

This year that Catholic Church is commemorating the centennial of a great document of the Catholic social teaching, Pope Leo XIII's Encyclical, "*Rerum novarum*". The "new things" to which he was referring was the development in the social world of ever new and worsening conditions of neglect and oppression of the human person. A view of common life had developed in which life was seen as an economic "war" waged by each person against the other, resulting in new oppressed classes of society which were spiritually and morally crippled and inaccessible to Christian influence. The political liberalism of the day did not respect the human dignity of each person to whom God had intended to bestow the goods of this world for the support of all. The understanding of procreation and of the family became distorted by these utilitarian ends, as well as the role of parents and society in the education of the young. The sense of human solidarity built upon a profound respect for each human person created in the image of God was in danger of being lost.

Pope Leo's Encyclical came as a result of the reflection and work of many who began to confront these problems in their day to day work. He referred explicitly to Bishop Von Ketteler of Mainz, Germany, as "my great predecessor" in the call for a renewed work for justice. Bishop Von Ketteler's experience among the working poor of Germany, seeing the condition of family life, of education and specifically of medical services, urged him to begin to organize not only the Bishops and Church leaders, but prominent Catholics in the professional fields as well, in order to begin to reverse and improve these terrible situations. Chief among those who contributed to these foundations of modern Catholic Social teaching were Catholic physicians who worked with Bishop Von Ketteler to begin to respond to the needs of the poor and dispossessed in clear understanding of the demands of justice and of the even greater demands of the Gospel to serve Christ present in his brothers and sisters. Here, indeed, was something new, and Pope Leo would hold it out as an example to the whole Church and the world.

The Church continued to build on these foundations and to try to call every person of good will to that view of human solidarity built on faith which serves as a cornerstone for the common good. But the problems referred to in Pope Leo's day have not disappeared, and in fact return in

diverse forms to our own day. Nor has the medical profession been exempt from complicity in these deformations of injustices and of oppression. Can one be proud of the role of medical science in the production of chemical arms in the First World War? The role some representatives of the medical profession filled in the horror programs of the Third Reich in Von Ketteler's beloved homeland? Even recently, does the role of medical personnel in the situation of political "management" in totalitarian societies, (I think, for instance, of President Gorbachev's condition of being declared "ill" or "incapacitated") fail to warn us of the dangers which are present for those who are not vigilant?

It is with this in mind that the Second Vatican Council, in its document on the Church, again calls us to a renewed vision of Christian vocation in the professional world. The Fathers wrote:

The faithful must, then, recognize the inner nature, the value and the ordering of the whole of creation to the praise of God. Even by their secular activity they must aid one another to greater holiness of life, so that the world might be filled with the spirit of Christ and may more effectively attain its destiny in justice, in love and in peace. The laity enjoy a principal role in the universal fulfillment of this task. Therefore, by their competence in secular disciplines and by their activity, interiorly raised up by grace, let them work earnestly in order that goods created through human labor, technical skills and civil culture may serve the good of all people according to the plan of the creator and in the light of His Word . . . .

Moreover, by uniting their forces, let the laity so remedy the institutions and conditions of the world when the latter are an inducement to sin, that these may be conformed to the norms of justice, favoring rather than hindering the practice of virtue . . . .

Because of the economy of salvation, the faithful should learn to distinguish carefully between the rights and duties which they have as belonging to the Church and those which fall to them as members of human society. They will strive to unite the two harmoniously, remembering that in every temporal affair they are to be guided by a Christian conscience, since not even in temporal business may any human activity be withdrawn from God's dominion. LG 36

That passage is a call and a challenge for you as Catholic Physicians. It refers not to an external imposition of elements of the Catholic faith on the day to day work which you do, but calls each of you to achieve a special perspective from which and by which you understand yourselves and the work which you do.

As in Von Ketteler's day, and the medical personnel who worked with him on behalf of the poor and working classes, the Catholic physician is one who should be marked by the perspective of faith. Such a person is one who has discovered the fundamental solidarity which is ours as human persons, created in God's image, and is willing to let that vision order the priorities which are set for their work, precisely because they see and understand that it is Christ whom they serve in the sick.

The perspective of faith is one which understands and judges the issues of the day, not in terms of the "war" of competing powers, political or economic, but are willing to see and act on these issues as matters of justice: the justice of right living in this world based on profound respect for each

human life, in every stage of its development, as well as the greater justice of sacrificing one's own self for the good and promotion of one's neighbor.

This is the perspective by which you are called to live your lives, and which this organization is called to serve and promote among you for the good of the Church and of our society.

In the service of the wider community, as *Lumen Gentium*, the Church brings her social teaching, so richly developed these past 100 years, to the task of building a more just society. The problems of today, while different from those which Leo XIII and Bishop Von Ketteler faced, are no less, if not more, acute. What is different is the degree to which physicians are pivotal to the contemporary moral crises.

If you would agree with me that abortion is the primordial evil of our time, then the role of the physician in our fundamental moral crisis is obvious. In the face of the dismal fact of 30,000,000 abortions annually in the world, the pervasive culture of death which so transfixes the modern mind has now broadened the parameters of acceptable killing to the terminally ill.

The culture of death is more extensive than that. Marriage and family are under relentless mortal attack. The child is not only the object of physical and mental abuse, but is also being robbed of youth itself by a society which equates sexual promiscuity as normative and which encourages it among the young.

Physicians tell me that they are alarmed at new attitudes reflected by some younger colleagues who have known nothing but this culture of death. The trust which physicians have enjoyed is at risk as a new attitude influenced by the culture of death infects the minds and hearts of some physicians.

Catholic physicians have an awesome responsibility to bring the light of the Church's social teaching and moral vision to bear on the debate so often framed as "the allocation of scarce resources." While such a debate can define a legitimate question, the question can also be a smokescreen for the relentless agenda of the culture of death. It is essential that Catholic physicians not be unwittingly co-opted by a strategy that denies the dignity of the human person. It is the sad history of these past 100 years that physicians have found themselves used, — abused — for immoral ends.

Undergirding Catholic social thought are two key ideas which provide a much needed perspective for the Catholic physician today. These key ideas or concepts are:

- (1) The dignity of the human person
- (2) Human Solidarity

The dignity of the human person, every human person from the first moment of conception to the last moment of natural death, is a truth attainable without the light of faith. Faith, however, illumines this truth for us. In Christ we see the full measure of human life. Faith gives the perspective that allows us to see the Lord in every human being. He said: "I was sick and you comforted me."

*Human solidarity* is at once a given and a goal more and more evident in the lives of men and women of good will. Faith illumines the truth of human solidarity through the reality of the Church's life as *communio*, as a sharing in the Trinitarian life of God. Eucharist, and central act of worship, both signs the *communio* that we are in Christ, and intensifies that same *communio*.

I would submit that it is our particular grasp of the dignity of the human person through Christian anthropology and human solidarity through that *communio* which is the Church which provides the unique perspective of Catholic physicians in the contemporary discussion.

— Bernard Cardinal Law  
Archbishop of Boston