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## ***Book Review***

*The Healer's Calling: A Spirituality for Physicians and Other Health Care Professionals* by Daniel P. Sulmasy, O.F.M., M.D., New York: Paulist Press, 1997. 135 pages, \$18.50 (Canadian).

Daniel Sulmasy, a medical doctor and Franciscan brother, writes out of his lived spiritual experience as a health care professional who is trying to follow Jesus of Nazareth. This book is an excellent source of reflection for health care professionals and others, who can find much inspiration for their own spiritual journey.

In our highly technological era, many have a hunger for meaning and an interest in spirituality. Working very hard, amidst demands and stresses, many health care professionals today are not satisfied. Sulmasy is aware that not all who have spiritual experiences, experience of the transcendent, identify this with God. In any case, as a believing Christian, he understands spiritual experience as an experience of God's transcendent love. Only God, Who loves each of us unconditionally can satisfy our deepest longings. Spirituality is a relationship of love, a relationship with God. Regardless of personal differences, all human beings are equal in being oriented toward the transcendent and by being-in-relationship with God and other human beings. Health care professionals are not called to be magicians but to be truly human healers like Jesus, by being in right relationships both with and their patients. Following Jesus' example, true healing involves compassion, touch and conversation. Clinicians can become truly spiritual men and women by encountering God in quiet time alone as well as in their midst, in their patients and practice.

Sulmasy understands medicine as "a science of probability and an art of uncertainty."<sup>(31)</sup> In the face of the excessive intolerance of uncertainty in health care today, health care professionals are called to be virtuous. Among other things, they are called to be trustworthy, patient, courageous, wise and humble; to accept their humanity, to know their limits and to trust in God.

In response to the malaise within medicine today, Sulmasy thinks medicine needs a genuine spirituality. Such is never individualistic, selfish, or divorced from other persons who are also created by the same loving God. Health care professionals are called to be teachers, healers, and people of prayer in imitation of the life of Jesus, the Great Physician. They are called to a rhythm of work and prayer. They need to take time to pray

to receive the gift of wisdom, to realize proper balance in their lives, and to have true zeal and compassion like the good Samaritan. They need to realize that they are not indispensable. God is.

Jesus says, "Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me." (Mt. 25:40) If physicians and nurses are open, they can experience intimacy with Christ in the vulnerability of their patients. They are called to be wounded healers. Being in touch with their own suffering, brokenness, loneliness and mortality can lead them to provide more understanding and compassionate care for the sick. They are called to hospitality, to strive to make their patients feel important, to pay attention to their needs. Often illness marked the turning point in the conversion of saints, e.g., St. Francis of Assisi and St. Ignatius of Loyola. Illness can clarify for patients and their families the central importance of "the power of love, which is the very life of God."(52)

Many studies show that generally positive health outcomes are associated with religious commitment and practice. Because religion is important to most patients, Sulmasy includes the question, "What role does religion play in your life?" as part of his routine new patient history. One needs to care for the biomedical good of the patient in the context of the good of the patient as a whole person. While keeping the role of pastor and clinician distinct, Sulmasy thinks it can be appropriate for health care professionals to talk with patients about their beliefs or unbelief, not to proselytize, but to get to know what is important to them. He prays for his patients and in appropriate circumstances prays with them.

Sulmasy speaks of prayer as raising up to God our entire selves – not only heart, mind and soul but also body. While appreciating that there are various valid approaches to prayer, including meditation and centering prayer, he develops a very interesting approach to prayer in relation to our five senses. Many clinicians find this approach helpful.

Any serious discussion of spirituality and health care, Sulmasy says, can not avoid the theme of human suffering. He relates human suffering to our being radically limited, distinguishing it from physical pain. Patient, from the Latin *patiens*, is "one who suffers." "Love calls forth compassionate responses to the suffering of others."(105) Medicine today can treat well most physical pain, but not aspects of suffering such as feelings of fear, loneliness, helplessness, and hopelessness. In Jesus, Who suffered in many ways like us, God understands our suffering, takes on human limitations and transcends them. The resurrection is promised to all who suffer in love.

To become a good clinician it is necessary to recognize one's own foibles, fallibility and vulnerability – that one is wounded and in need of healing oneself. Some health care professionals suffer from the

dysfunction of desiring to control everything. They need to realize that they are not the organizing principle of the universe, God is. Paraphrasing Gabriel Marcel, Sulmasy speaks of the patient not as "a problem to be solved, but as a mystery in whose presence the clinician is privileged to dwell." (118) No individual can fix all human problems. If one tries to be Superman or Superwoman, one will burn out. Health care professionals need to look for healing and strength for themselves by prayer and by sharing feelings of inadequacy and guilt with someone such as a spouse, counselor or confessor. Frankly, admitting one's failures becomes a moment of grace which is everywhere. We are all called to holiness, not to pretensions of perfection, but to honesty and courage, to live the Beatitudes (Mk 5:3-10).

Despite the many problems in modern health care, Sulmasy affirms that clinicians can be happy. They can experience true joy if they know that they and all people are wonderfully made and loved by God, and that the healing power of the Spirit can be mediated through their gifts of hands and mind. If they dwell in the present and are grateful for the privilege to serve the sick, remembering that each patient is a gift from God, they will be richly blessed.

The above only summarizes some of the many insights in Sulmasy's wonderful book. His presentation integrates well practice and faith, personal experiences and balanced reflections. Although he writes as a believing Christian within the Catholic tradition, his ecumenical approach will appeal to a wider audience. I highly recommend the reading of this book.

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