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Your Faith Is Your Salvation and Maybe Your Patients' Too

by

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The following was a Keynote Address delivered by the author at The Catholic Medical Association, Diocese of Lansing, Rose Mass Banquet, on March 24, 2001.

There are three universally recognized pillars of society: the clergy, who care for our spiritual life; lawyers, who enable us to live in an organized society; and doctors, who keep us physically healthy. Speaking to Catholic health care workers is relatively easy for a priest because I share with you a common faith in salvation through Jesus Christ, a common worldview or teleology that has a source, direction and end, and a common vocation to live and preach the Truth. Through faith and reason we recognize the source, purpose and goal of our existence to be God. Recall how one of the very first questions of the Baltimore Catechism presented these basics: Q: "Why did God make me?" A: "To know Him, to love Him and to serve Him in this world so that I may be happy with Him in the next." This fundamental understanding of human existence is reiterated in Pope John Paul II's recent encyclical, *Fides et Ratio* (1998), in which the Pope demonstrates how theologians, philosophers and scientists share a common vocation in unveiling the truth about man and human existence. The ultimate questions of reality — Who am I? Why do things exist? What is the goal of human life? Why is there suffering? Is there life after death? — take on light, he cautions, "only in the mystery of the incarnate Word... . Where might the human being seek the answer to [such] dramatic

questions...., if not in the light streaming from the mystery of Christ's Passion, Death and Resurrection?"

As Catholic men and women of faith, you share in the responsibility of unveiling the truth of Christ to those you serve. This is the vocation of every Christian but especially so for those involved in the healing arts. From the earliest records of human history, medicine has always been identified with the sacred. Primitive civilizations saw a connection between physical healing and the spiritual world. Shamanism, faith healing, twelve-step programs and New Age therapies attest to the powerful connections between faith and medicine that persist even today in the collective human psyche under the veneer of a materialistic and scientifically based society. The underlying sense is that there is a divine source or wisdom that both informs and affects the objective world order. Perhaps the ancient Greeks, those originators of Western philosophical thought, provide us with the best examples of a union of theology, philosophy and science in their famous temple of Asclepius or the Isle of Epidaurus. Invalids came to those places to consult the gods and obtain cures at the hands of the priests.

The union of the healing arts and the spiritual realm are best demonstrated in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, the Wisdom of God. In the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament, especially from the 2nd century B.C., we see a strong Greek influence which permeated Palestine under the Ptolemy rulers. The connection between divinity and healing was not lost on the early Church, which identified Jesus as Divine Wisdom — the one who reveals the Truth and the Reign of God, which He said "will set you free." Jesus demonstrated His power to set people free through His healing miracles. The Gospels attest to, and modern scripture scholars agree, that Jesus did in fact cure the blind, the lame, the deaf, the mute and the woman with the hemorrhaging, and also returned a sick girl to health. These miraculous acts, however wonderful in themselves, were performed mainly to show the restoration of man to fullness of life in God's Kingdom, indeed, a New Eden through the New Adam. Each healing miracle, therefore, was and is an epiphany or a manifestation of God's acting presence in our world. It is the task of Catholic doctors, nurses and health care workers to carry on this healing ministry of Jesus. You have been entrusted with the gifts of human knowledge and the gift of faith which, through your skillful application, may enable people to taste The Kingdom of God already present but not yet fully revealed.

Because we live in the "not yet" no matter what skills we may have or how deep our faith, there is the inevitability of limitation and physical death. For those without the light of faith, this might be interpreted as ultimately dooming our efforts. Yet, whereas Christianity has always

deemed life to be a high good, it is only a penultimate good — the highest good being eternal life with God. It is, therefore, your vocation as disciples of Christ to be ministers of “The Gospel of Life,” which entrusts you with not only the care of our physical well-being but with responsibility for our eternal destiny.

How might this be done? Let me tell you a true story that took place at Ave Maria Law School. We were in Torts class discussing (I’m sorry to bring up the subject) medical malpractice. The case before us dealt with a “wrongful birth” suit. The case turned on the notion that the physician was negligent in not informing the parents of the danger to the fetus due to the mother having contracted rubella during the pregnancy, as a result of which the child was born with multiple birth defects. When the professor explained that it is the duty of the physician to tell the truth to their patients, a number of students protested that this sort of knowledge could lead women to abort their children and, therefore, a doctor should not be obliged to divulge it. When the specter of prenatal and genetic testing results were brought into the discussion, some students became even more obstinate about withholding information from patients since this could lead to abortion. It was then pointed out to the students that according to the Civil Code and medical ethics, the patient must be told the truth. Furthermore, since I was present, I told them that traditional Catholic morality requires the truth to be told to those who have a legitimate right to know it, even if one believes that lying or lack of full disclosure would enable a higher good, *i.e.*, the preservation of life. This, I went on to say, may seem to put the Catholic physician or health care professional in a quandary, since delivering a bad report may lead to the destruction of life, except for the fact that our faith binds us not only to tell the truth but also to give witness to The Truth.

Your faith and your vocation provide you with opportunities to evangelize people in the most critical moments of life. For those of you who are involved with life at its very beginning from conception to birth, your testimony to the intrinsic value of human life, even less than perfect life by society’s standards, may preserve the unborn child and save the souls of his or her parents. By your words and actions, you have the power to unveil the deeper mysteries of grace being offered to parents of special children. The reciprocity of extraordinary love between them and their child can indeed be the source of their salvation as they live out the Gospel of Life in a witness of faith that will both humanize them and edify others.

Many of you have patients suffering from chronic diseases and other serious illnesses requiring painful therapies and surgeries and long hospital stays, or patients with permanent disabilities, mental illnesses and addictions. The suffering, the fear and the question “why?” always need

your attention and witness. Fortunately, because you are people of faith, you can enable these patients to see their crosses not as punishment, but as Mother Teresa said in *The Best Gift is Love*, “the Passion of Christ being relived in the lives of those who suffer.” Suffering, she said, “is a sign — a sign that we have come so close to Jesus on the cross that He can kiss us, show that He is in love with us by giving us an opportunity to share in His Passion. It is a gift that allows us to share in His suffering to make up for the sins of the world.” Like all gifts, however, Mother Teresa reminds us that, “the cross depends on the way we receive it.” St. John Vianney said, “It is by the cross we go to heaven.” Your ministry can help your patients to receive it as such and help them get to heaven.

Finally, all of you have had to inform patients of terminal illness or work with patients who are terminally ill. It is a humbling experience to recognize that your human skills, medications and technologies are futile and that death is imminent. Nevertheless, in acknowledging the truth of our human limitations and the imminence of earthly finality, it is your job to speak The Truth by unveiling for your patients the hope of eternal life. Very recently, HBO aired “Wit,” a Pulitzer Prize-winning play by Margaret Edson. It is the portrayal of a woman with fourth-stage metastatic ovarian cancer (there is, she notes in her soliloquy, no fifth stage). In her advanced illness, she becomes an object to doctors and clinical fellows — they observe her pain, but except for one nurse, no one can feel it. The loneliness, frustration and despair is the overbearing message of the play. And unfortunately, that’s all there is for her doctors and for her. For your patients, however, this need never be the case, because the truth is, there is a fifth stage — eternal life with God. When you give this prognosis, darkness gives way to light, despair to hope and death to life. In doing this, you fulfill your vocation as a Christian doctor and may bring a patient to eternal life.

My dear Catholic doctors and health care workers, speaking to you is a pleasure and a consolation because of who you are, what you do for human life and what you can do for eternal life. You know the power of medicine and you know its limits. You also have been given the fullness of knowledge regarding man’s origin, purpose and destiny. Because of this, you know that your faith is your salvation and, as you can see, maybe your patients’ too.
