

5-1-2003

[Book Review of] *The Healer's Calling: A Spirituality for Physicians and Other Health Care Professionals*, by Daniel P. Sulmasy

Eric Kilbreath

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

 Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Medicine and Health Sciences Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Kilbreath, Eric (2003) "[Book Review of] *The Healer's Calling: A Spirituality for Physicians and Other Health Care Professionals*, by Daniel P. Sulmasy," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 70: No. 2, Article 11.  
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol70/iss2/11>

John Paul II, and so it is, I think, a significant omission to leave him out of the discussion altogether.

Fourth, I thought that Dyck's discussion was disengaged from the broader cultural forces in play. He seems to reflect some confidence that his new synthesis will work us out of the problems that we are facing in this area. The tone at times almost seems to reflect the belief that we can solve these problems if we just clarify our thinking. I think he understates the extent to which the culture of death has been institutionalized in our culture (maybe this is due to his neglect of abortion), and that the long-term battle is really spiritual, and not just legal or moral.

On the whole, however, Dyck's short book is worth reading. I think, in particular, that his more communal understanding of human rights is valuable. As he notes, "[h]uman rights become actual only through actions, patterns of behavior, and social arrangements that render their actualization possible." (p. 91.) And, as he also notes, it is essential that our "law reflects, teaches, and supports the incalculable worth of the life of each individual." (p. 119.)

— **Richard S. Myers,**  
**Professor of Law,**  
**Ave Maria School of Law.**

*The Healer's Calling: A Spirituality for Physicians and Other Health Care Professionals* by Daniel P. Sulmasy, O.F.M., M.D., (New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1997) 135 pages, paperback, \$11.95

Sulmasy, a Franciscan brother and a physician, writes that his book evolved from a retreat he gave for physicians. The material comes from his experience of being a Christian who works as a health care professional. The book should be understood "as a series of reflections on the lived spiritual experience of one Christian health care professional, asking where God is to be found in the work of health care, and asking where a person who purports to be a follower of Jesus of Nazareth can lay claim to the work of health care in the name of the kingdom of God." (p. 3)

Sulmasy senses a malaise among health care professionals that is partly, if not wholly, a spiritual affair. While medicine is able to do more and more for the patient, health care professionals are taking less satisfaction from their work. Status, money, vacation time are not enough to motivate the hard work of these professionals. Clinical work itself will not cover the sense of despair and frustration. While repairing a damaged patient does bring a certain amount of joy and satisfaction, it is not enough to satisfy one's longings. Only the pursuit of one's ultimate end, union with God, will quench human longings.

He gives a traditional definition of spirituality — “*one’s spirituality is a description of one’s relationship with God.*” (p. 10) The popular misconception of prayer being consistently warm and full of richness is discussed. A relationship with God waxes and wanes but always requires commitment and work. “Far too much of what passes for spirituality today is a form of either drug abuse or narcissism. Spirituality cannot just be another species of the consumerism of experience, trying to get ‘high’ through meditation or to find feelings of peace mediated through a crystal.” (p. 13)

Sulmasy advocates an emphasis on the spiritual aspects of healing and stresses the transcendent meaning of the health care profession. In describing this transcendent meaning, the author advocates seeing the patient not merely as a means of bringing professional job satisfaction, but a point of departure to encountering God. While Sulmasy sees nothing wrong at all with the approach of a physician or nurse perceiving him/herself as bringing the healing presence of Christ to the patient and offering grace and God’s healing power, he prefers to explore another approach. Health care professionals “can find an experience of Christ in practice, not so much as the One who guides their hands or the One who practices at their side, but rather by seeing Christ in the patients they serve.” (p. 47) The transition from perceiving oneself as bringing God’s grace to the patient to seeing Christ in one’s patient bring with it a sense of humility. The result is the need to understand oneself as a wounded healer. Such a person’s work is marked hospitality toward the sick in the form of concentrating on the patient’s story, acting with compassion and maintaining a perspective that sees the wounds of the patients as the wounds of God. (p. 50)

The book is of most relevance to those members of the medical profession who are struggling with integrating their spiritual beliefs into their professional lives. In fact, that is the purpose of this book. It succeeds to a point. It is an enjoyable book to read. One can finish the book and know the points the author was making. One criticism is that there is a looseness in its structure, a meandering sometimes that weakens its effect. Each chapter appears too distinct, a reflection written on its own with little linking it to other chapters in a logical progression to the author’s thesis. However, given the strength of each individual chapter, it makes it good material for a reading or discussion group.

**- Eric Kilbreath  
University of Bristol**