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The Priestly Ministry of the Doctor

Rev. Edward J. Ingebretsen, S.J.

The following article was developed from a talk given by Father Ingebretsen to the Arizona Catholic Physicians' Guild in Phoenix in August, 1981.

In an address to a congress of physicians and surgeons last year, Pope John Paul II praised those in attendance for the "service to human beings" to which they, as a profession, are called. He went on to say that in the extraordinary acceleration of history which marks our age, the right of the human person to the full dignity of life has never been so fully recognized, and that medicine is playing a role of the first order in shaping this consciousness.¹

Although the roles of the medical practitioner and the professional priest or minister have traditionally been seen as separate and distinct vocations, examination of New Testament sources will show a clear convergence between the two.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus responds to the emissaries of John by saying that they are to report what they hear and see: "The blind recover their sight, cripples walk, lepers are cured, the deaf hear, and the poor have the good news preached to them."² Jesus speaks of Himself as being a person Whose mission was simple — to heal, to care, to make whole again, to reconcile that which is unreconciled.

The gospels emphasize again and again that this is the priesthood of Jesus Christ and, indeed, the mission and the vocation of any who would wear the name of Christ. Yet in a special way, those who practice the art of medicine share in His priestly ministry. The priesthood of Jesus Christ is a rich and unqualified giving of self to others, speaking a human word to those who are hurt, divided, in need, and which human word becomes a divine word and gift of healing, of love, of care, of human dignity.

By definition a priest is a person who mediates, who makes possible the self-revelation of the Father through Jesus Christ — the priest is a healer, one who reconciles. Those of us who are priests must realize that our spiritual ministry gives strong impetus to the natural process of healing, and those of us in the medical profession, regardless of kind or specialty, must understand that we are active in a way which is nothing else, if not priestly.

A theologian recently suggested to a group of newly-ordained men that a prime sign of the priestly vocation is the priest's inability to ward off or to hide himself from significant human suffering in his life. As doctors, as healers, as the veritable hands of Jesus Christ moving into and through a world touched by personal and communal sin, we must share this inability. We are not at liberty to refuse the brokenness that comes to us, and which asks of us care and mercy. We cannot merely stand as spectators toward the evil and the sickness and the disease which surround us even as the air does. We must be unable to ward off these sensitivities, and this sickness and disease and suffering will empty us. This is our vocation. The ministry that is our healing will perhaps rob us of our own resources of health and strength, and like Peter when he is old, we will be bound by our ministry and taken where we would not always want to go. In this way, doctors and medical practitioners are priests in the traditional and Biblical sense of the word. The doctor shares in the cultic priesthood of those who are publicly ordained.

In a real sense, as priests and doctors, it matters less that we can cure or reconcile or make whole, as much as it is imperative that we CARE. We must care before we can cure. In this way, we "are merciful, as our heavenly Father is merciful." To quote from John Paul's address again:

The relation between doctor and patient must once again be based on a dialogue that involves listening, respect, and concern; it must become again an authentic encounter of two free human beings, or as it has been put, between "trust" and "conscience."

This kind of relationship will enable the sick to feel . . . that they retain the innermost essence of their humanity and whose right to truth and the good, on both religious and human levels, is respected. ³

As priests who are healers, as healers who are priestly, the word of salvation, the good news which we bear is precisely this: that human life is sanctified, a holy presence, sacred, because through the human is made manifest the totally gracious and unqualified love of the Father Who is rich in mercy. ⁴

In his apostolic letter to the whole Church, entitled *Rich in Mercy*, Pope John Paul makes this sanctification even clearer. He says the primary way of the Church, the way traced by Christ Himself, is a way that leads through the human, and it is a way of mercy — "a love that is active, a love that addresses human beings and embraces everything

that is part of their humanity. This kind of love makes itself especially evident when it comes in contact with sickness, injustice and need. . . ."⁵

This is *mercy*, the care that is the specific and concrete vocation demanded of all healers — priests and doctors — demanded of all persons who are called and committed to the service of raising the sacred in the human.

An English proverb states that the best surgeon is the one who has himself been hacked. To give mercy, to recognize the dignity of the human, to oppose all who would denigrate this dignity is to say that in my own life I can heal, I can care, because I acknowledge the need for healing, for caring. This is our vocation. We touch and we listen and we care and we care deeply, and we who in ourselves find radical unwholeness, who in ourselves know radical failures, are thus empowered by this unwholeness and suffering to raise the dignity of the human to the sacred. We are able to cure. We are priests in the name and service of Jesus Christ.

As doctors we may indeed be the only contact many people will have with the gracious mercy of a good God. We shall be the only priests many people shall know. If we are merciful, then indeed our techniques of curing shall be priestly, ministerial, holy. Our ministry as Christian doctors must be different from persons who merely practice medicine; we are called to live out in our own lives the self-revelation of God, the merciful God. To the poor we proclaim a word of richness — a richness of mercy. To those in need we proclaim an active word, one that heals, that gives sight, that establishes human intimacy and dignity. This word is one which is spoken with authority and is priestly, if it is first spoken by the authority of our own lives as healers in need of healing.

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1. John Paul II, Pope, "A Patient Is a Person," *The Pope Speaks*, vol. 26, no. 1 (1981), p. 2.
 2. Luke 7:20-23.
 3. John Paul II, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
 4. Ephesians 2:4.
 5. John Paul II, Pope, "Rich in Mercy," *The Pope Speaks*, vol. 26, no. 1 (1981), p. 25.
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