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Saint Luke: Model of the Physician

Michael Cantley, S.T.D.

One very human temptation that men of every age, persuasion and background have found to be a siren call not easily resisted is the temptation to define the indefinable and to express the inexpressible. This is the assignment that has fallen to me today. To speak of St. Luke as the model for physicians presupposes an ability to define what the ideal physician is; and it presupposes the ability to capture in the fragile vessel of words the illusive spirit of a man and saint who lived two thousand years ago. But the task is a challenging one because the lives of great men are challenging, and the ideals of a great profession are fascinating to contemplate. It is for this reason that I willingly accepted Father Konrad's invitation, and am thankful to you for the opportunity to develop this theme.

There are many ways in which this subject could have been broached. As I sifted them, the one that kept returning to my mind was suggested by an heraldic shield I once saw. It

was a shield bearing a medical legend. Perhaps many of you will recognize it as I describe it to you. If you were to face the shield, you would view its ensign standing out on a field of bright blue. One half of the shield bears the forearm and hand of a woman. The other half is subdivided: the top quarter has the head of an eagle with its eye most prominent; the lower quarter carries the picture of a lion. The symbolic meaning of the entire legend is easy to discern. The doctor is reminded that his vocation demands that he be gentle as a woman; that his practiced eye be as discerning as that of the eagle to disclose sickness and injury; that his pursuit of sickness be courageous so that he may master the wilderness of suffering as the lion masters the enemy in a hostile jungle.

This tripartite message offers us a most useful paradigm for our discussion of the virtues of St. Luke as they might serve the physician seeking a model for his own life and practice.

The gentleness of Luke has been observed by practically every commentator on his Gospel. His is often called the Gospel of the poor and the lowly because their plight plays such a significant role in his depiction of the life and ministry of Christ. In the infancy chapters, Luke emphasizes the modest circumstances surrounding

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the birth of Jesus and the fact that His first visitors were lowly shepherds. Luke recalls that Jesus' inaugural sermon was delivered in His home town of Nazareth where He chose His text from Isaiah (61:1-2) "The spirit of the Lord . . . has sent me to bring the good news to the poor [and to heal the broken-hearted (cf. LXX)]". Indeed, the theme of poverty so fascinated Luke that, in order to give it full treatment, he preserved words of Jesus we do not find elsewhere. This is clear in chapter 12 (13-21) of his Gospel, where Luke presents a magnificently balanced picture focusing on a proper attitude that one should have toward material possessions. First he depicts Jesus' severity with a young man who shamelessly drags a family quarrel into the open. "Take heed", Jesus says, "and guard yourselves from all covetousness, for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions". Then, to balance the dyptic, Luke recalls a parable in which Jesus teaches that a man is foolish if he makes life consist in a struggle for riches. Sudden death may intervene and find the man spiritually impoverished. It is better, He teaches, to be rich in the things of God than the things of this world. Luke's message of compassion finds similar expression in the parables peculiar to his Gospel: the parable of the good Samaritan; the story of the rich man and Lazarus; and the story of the importunate friend who begs bread to feed a guest who has arrived late at night — these are, perhaps, the most poignant examples.

Among the poor and lonely, Luke had a special concern for women. In the social circumstances of his day, women bereft of family or dignity were the most impoverished and

vulnerable. Jesus' tenderness toward them touched Luke, the physician, so deeply that he took special care to record it. He alone tells the story of Jesus raising the dead son of the widow of Naim; and Luke alone records the repentance of the sinful woman who entered the house of Simon the Pharisee to wipe Jesus' feet with her tears and dry them with her hair.

In the Old Testament, the poor were the *anawim*. They were totally bereft. They could depend neither on the instinctive kindness of men nor the mandated charity of the Mosaic Law to come to their assistance. God alone was their refuge. Luke's physician's heart beat at one with the heart of Christ as he considered the plight of God's poor and needy. For this reason, he refuses to materialize the Beatitudes as Matthew does. Rather than to say "Blessed are the poor in spirit . . ." (Mt. 5:3), Luke says right out: "Blessed are you poor for yours is the Kingdom of God" (6:20).

Every doctor knows, as Luke did, that poverty is often the bed of sickness and suffering. It is a condition magnanimously recognized in the *Principles of Medical Ethics* of the American Medical Association (Ch. 7, Sec. 1) which states: "Poverty of a patient . . . should command the gratuitous services of the physician". Good medicine seeks not only to cure but to prevent sickness. The magnificent strides that man has made over the past centuries is due in no small measure to the concern the medical profession has shown in both the curative and preventive aspects of the medical arts.

People instinctively expect a lot of the doctor. Once we know that Paul in Colossians 4:14 describes Luke as

a physician we immediately find ourselves expecting more of him than we do of any of the other New Testament writers. This expectation puts a tremendous burden on the doctor's shoulders. But it is a mark of the respect we have for the man who lives so close to the mystery of life. Luke does not disappoint our expectations. He is a keen, open-minded observer; eager — as we have already observed — to relieve suffering; anxious — as we shall shortly observe — to restore peace of soul in forgiving weak human nature. In Luke, there is evidence of hostility toward no one except charlatans and hypocrites.

Luke uses medical terms accurately. His descriptions of medical phenomena show a marked agreement with the writings of the ancient Greek physician Galen. Where other Evangelists are rather general — as laymen would be — in their descriptions of the diseases Jesus cured, Luke is more complete and more accurate. He tells us, for example, that Peter's mother-in-law had a *high fever* (4:38), where the other Evangelists, Mark (1:30) and Matthew (8:14) speak only of a fever. Luke is also very understanding in his treatment of doctors. In 8:14 ff., he describes the cure of the woman who had suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years. In this section of his Gospel, Luke was using Mark as a source. Mark, in his account of this cure, is very harsh on doctors (5:26). He tells us that the woman was still suffering even "after long and painful treatment under various doctors, she had spent all she had without being any the better for it; in fact, she was getting worse". But Luke says, sympathetically, that she was a woman "whom no one had been able to cure". Luke realized that the

doctor could not be blamed for his inability to cure a condition only the God-Man could heal.

Luke can be an impressive observer of physical details when he is describing physical ailments. Listen to his description of the woman brought to Jesus on a Sabbath. She had suffered for eighteen years from a malady that left her enfeebled, "she was bent double and unable to hold her head erect". Listen again, as he describes Jesus' bloody sweat — he is the only Evangelist to do so — "In his anguish he (Jesus) prayed even more earnestly, and his sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood" (22:43-44). Listen to one more impressive clinical-type observation. It is found in Luke's *Acts of the Apostles* (3:1ff.). Peter cured a man who had been crippled since birth. Luke records that "Peter took him by the hand and helped him to stand up. Instantly his feet and ankles became firm, he jumped up, stood, and began to walk, and he went with them into the Temple, walking and jumping and praising God". What a magnificent account of a man tentatively beginning to do the unfamiliar thing he had envied in others and scarcely dreamed of doing himself! The doctor reading these lines must surely thrill at the memories they evoke from his own practice when his skillful, healing hands pulled the cripple from the inertia of sickness to the excited vitality of restored health.

Luke's concern for bodily cures is matched by his solicitude for the health of mind and spirit. Surely, Luke's medical background made him sensitive to those aspects of Jesus' teaching which emphasized mercy. Luke's Gospel is frequently called the

"Gospel of mercy and pardon". In this category, we easily recall a story peculiar to Luke's Gospel, the story of the prodigal son (15:11-32). Again, only the "Gospel of pardons" records the story of Zacchaeus, the publican, expressing his intense desire to see Jesus by climbing into the mulberry tree (the greek word *sukamineas* is responsible for the faulty English translation "Sycamore" 19:1-10). Luke alone records Jesus' words of pardon to His persecutors "Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing" (23:24). Only Luke preserves the story which contains the "second word" of Jesus from the Cross, His pledge to the good thief: "Indeed, I promise you . . . today you will be with me in paradise". (23:43).

Luke, the good physician, was concerned for the whole man, body and soul. Hippocrates' description of the physician, that he should be "modest, sober, patient, prompt to do his whole duty without anxiety; pious without going so far as superstition, conducting himself with propriety in his profession and in all the actions of his life" adequately fits St. Luke. Luke is mentioned only three times in the New Testament (Col. 4:14; Philemon 28; 2 Tim. 4:11). In each case, Paul describes Luke in the light of service as a physician, as Paul's fellow worker, and, during Paul's imprisonment in Rome, as the last and only one left to break the monotony of Paul's loneliness. Often, it is the doctor, with his patient care, who breaks the loneliness of man's illness and suffering.

Gentleness and acute perceptiveness, necessary as they are, must be complemented by courage. Courage is uniquely a doctor's virtue. It is this that prepared Luke to enter into the

Apostolic ministry of Paul. It stood Paul's suffering during two periods of imprisonment in Rome and accompanied Paul on the second and third missionary journeys. These journeys were marked by hardships of all kinds. More often than the other Evangelists, Luke writes that Jesus *must* suffer (9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 22:37; 24:7, 26, 46). Moreover, Luke intensifies Jesus' words that anyone who wishes to follow Jesus must deny himself and assume the cross. Luke adds to the support of this doctrine by the other Evangelists, that this must be done *daily* (9:23).

There are growing indications that the life of the Catholic doctor will entail much suffering in the future, a suffering that may be a kind of martyrdom. The root of the Greek word *martyr* means 'witness'. In the areas of contraception and abortion, the Catholic physician is likely to be a true martyr to the faith he professes. In this, he is not unlike his model St. Luke who shared in Paul's suffering for the faith. The Christian must often react against the environment in which he is forced to live out his days. In reacting, he purges it of its evil that he may transform it in Christ.

There is an interesting medical reference in Paul's letter to the Galatians (5:20) that makes our point. Luke is very likely the source of Paul's terminology. Paul threatens those who practice *pharmakeia* with exclusion from the Kingdom of God. Quite obviously, honest medicine is not meant, since Luke the physician is held in very high regard. The Latin Vulgate uses the word "veneficia" (poisonous) to translate the term. Our English New Testaments use "witchcraft" or "sorcery" as a translation. But the *Materia Medica* of

Dioscorides of Cilicia, written around 75 A.D., a book of pharmaceutical information, perhaps, gives us the best meaning for the term. He uses the word *pharmakeia* as a heading for his list of contraceptive potions. Could this not be the meaning of the phrase in the oath of Hippocrates where the doctor swears to administer no poison to anyone nor to give any woman a device that will cause her an abortion. Fidelity to true moral teaching did not spare Luke a martyr's death. It is likely not to spare the Catholic physician a martyr's life.

Luke is a model not a mold. His life, his choices, his personality are absolutely unique and non-transferable. But the physicians' virtues of courage, perceptive concern and loving dedication are common property. They are yours for the taking. May Luke the physician transform your lives into the pattern of his own, that as he bore the marks of Christ in his own flesh, you too, through his intercession, may bear Christ to all to whom you minister.

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