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## Letters

Catholic Physicians' Guild

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## Letters . . .

Gerald P. J. Griffin, M.D.  
c/o LINACRE QUARTERLY  
2825 N. Mayfair Road  
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Dear Doctor Griffin:

I have read your article in the May, 1974 issue of the LINACRE QUARTERLY, "Catholic Physicians and the Directives for Catholic Health Facilities," and I want to thank you for putting into words what I feel about these directives. I'm sure that many other Catholic doctors, especially those working in "developing" countries, agree with your thinking in this regard.

Sincerely yours,

Katherine F. Jobson, M.D., M.P.H.,  
F.A.A.P.

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To the Editor:

In the August issue, Reverend Charles Curran gave a summary description of the traditional teaching on cooperation. Believing that there is a lack in this treatment, he invoked the teachings of Vatican II on religious freedom and the fact of pluralism as a basis for remedying the alleged deficiency. His remedy consists in stressing subjectivity and rights of conscience to such an extent that he holds a Catholic hospital and physician could act against their own moral standards as long as no harm comes to the rights of innocent persons, the peace and common morality of society.

The author's interpretations lead him to state that a Catholic surgeon who believes that a contraceptive sterilization is immoral could act against this standard because his patient in good faith holds a contrary view. The author's inexperience with hospital life is most apparent if for one moment he thinks this schizoid performance could occur without harming the innocent and the common morality of society.

Any surgeon who would be as advised by this article could cause a real scandal to arise for all who would know or learn of his procedure. Not to mention the defamation he would incur for so acting. When a surgeon operates, it is in the presence of others who know him, his moral standards and that of the hospital. Does the author really believe that Doctor X's departure from an objective standard of moral conduct would produce no adverse effects on others and the institution? Would it not be harmful, for all who observe Doctor X to become confused by his example and be led to the conclusion that contraceptive sterilization is a morally correct procedure and that papal teachings need not be followed or even be disregarded? If the author believes that a short course in casuistic distinctions would prevent any misinterpretation, his hope is unrealistic. What would really happen would be that Doctor X's procedure and departure from the moral code he is known to espouse would be known within the hospital by his peers, the nursing staff, and the personnel in the hospital. There is little doubt that the news would also reach the community in which the hospital is located and the damage done to objectively correct moral standards would be immeasurable. Many would be led astray and believe that the Catholic Church now considers it licit to sterilize because Dr. X performs such surgery and the Catholic hospital permitted it.

While the author stresses the case of sterilization, he most cautiously introduces the theoretical possibility of direct abortion also being allowed, using the same premises of the patient's erroneous conscience and religious freedom as justification. If logic can lead to this conclusion, then there is something radically wrong with his premises. Interpretations of this kind, in reality, simply mean an accommo-

modation to the permissive morality of the day and the corrosion of Christian morals. This type of casuistry is ivory towerish and causes only confusion and doubt about the obligation to follow an objective standard of morals to avoid the morass of subjectivism and individual codes of morals. What good is obtained by this coddling of individualism in the field of morals when in no field of human effort is there sought anything but truth which can be manifested in objective standards?

The fact of pluralism is used constantly by the author and other modern writers as if this were a phenomenon newly discovered and that it is something which is so telling that its presence alters many judgments made in the past. Historically speaking, pluralism is as old as mankind. Thus the need of tolerance has always existed. But it is not one of the reasons for asking a surgeon to act against his correctly formed conscience and then to tell him to assuage the consequent feeling of guilt with the knowledge that his patient's erroneous views in good faith in a pluralistic society can govern his conduct. What about the personal dignity of the surgeon and his religious freedom? What about his Christian duty to be a light in a darkened world? Religious freedom certainly means that coercion should be avoided, but it is far-fetched to think it should lead to schizoid moral performance in medicine or in any field. It certainly doesn't mean that Catholic surgeons and institutions should not act according to definite accepted moral standards, and be known for such. To employ casuistry to avoid this duty can only breed scandal and ill serve the cause of Catholicism and the loyalty owed to the guidance given by the Holy Father.

Since the author has used the Declaration on Religious Freedom of Vatican II, it is well to remember that "religious freedom" and "freedom of

conscience" are not one and the same thing, which it seems the author has adopted in his premises. It states in the commentary in the Abbott Edition on the Documents of Vatican II:

In guaranteeing the free exercise of religion, the First Amendment guarantees to the American citizen immunity from all coercion in matters religious. Neither the Declaration nor the American Constitution affirms that a man has a right to believe what is false or to do what is wrong. This would be moral nonsense. Neither error nor evil can be the object of a right only what is true and good. It is, however, true and good that a man should enjoy freedom from coercion in matters religious.

also,

It is worth noting that the Declaration does not base the right to the free exercise of religion on "freedom of conscience." Nowhere does this phrase occur. And the Declaration nowhere lends its authority to the theory for which the phrase frequently stands; namely, that I have the right to do what my conscience tells me to do. This is a perilous theory. Its particular peril is subjectivism — the notion that in the end it is my conscience and not the objective truth which determines what is right or wrong, true or false.

The author makes much of the dissent among some theologians as if this were something decisive, or a reason not to abide by authoritative teachings. It would seem that more weight should be given by the author to the words of Vatican II, that "in the formation of their consciences, the Christian faithful ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church. The Church is, by the will of Christ, the teacher of the truth. It is her duty to give utterance to and authoritatively to teach that Truth which is Christ Himself, and also to declare and confirm by her authority those principles of the moral order which have their origin in human nature itself."

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