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From the Editor's Desk: Physicians' Vital Message

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From the Editor's Desk



Physicians' Vital Message

Recently I had the privilege of attending the executive committee meeting of the International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations, in our newly established Secretariat in Rome, as the association's assistant treasurer.

At the meeting were representatives from India, England, Belgium, France, Spain, Argentina, the Philippines, New Zealand and the United States. Representatives of the Holy See were in attendance and conveyed to us the deep concerns of Pope John Paul II, and his desire to see us flourish and grow. FIAMC, as our organization is acronyms called, following the French title, "Federation Internationale des Associations Medicales Catholiques," is truly international, with all five continents and Oceania being represented. For the first time, Catholic physicians from every culture, nation and race are gathered together and have a central office in the seat of Christendom, Rome. The organization enjoys close relations with the Holy Father through his representatives to us. It was pointed out to us by Msgr. Peter Coughlin, under-secretary of the Council of the Laity, that not only did Pope John Paul II come to us at our International Congress in Rome in 1982, but so did all of the major leaders of the Curia. Never in his memory did he see the whole power structure of the Vatican attend, as a group, any similar gathering in Rome. I reiterate these

observations to you, our readers, to impress upon you how vital is our mission as Catholic physicians in this secularist, humanistic and pagan world.

John Paul II, in his addresses, continually reminds the world of the innate dignity of the human being which comes from God, his Creator. He reminds the world that in medical affairs, this dignity should always be affirmed and promoted. He has come out strongly for the innate right to medical care as a correlative of this dignity. He continues to promote the advance of medical research as being the handmaiden of the promotion of this dignity. And it is our job as Catholic physicians to help implement and give witness to these values so eloquently expressed by Christ's representative on earth.

In the present climate in the United States, many of these concepts are being eroded in the medical profession and in the provision of health care. We only have to look at the statistics for abortion, the drive for active euthanasia, the deprivation of medical care for defective infants, to see how these values have been discarded. On a larger note, the current efforts of government, business and industry to disenfranchise segments of our population from excellent medical care, under the banner of "cost containment," are enough to make one disheartened and discouraged. These latter efforts have come about because of concern about the high costs of medical care. You are all aware of the arguments which have been successful in mobilizing Congress, business and industry at achieving their goal of establishing cost containment as policy. I will not reiterate them. However, this same society, just a few short years ago, established a kind of Camelot in this country in which the right to excellent medical care was matched by policies and money to make this right a reality for the least members of our society. Now we are faced with a new reality, viz., the rationing of care for our society. It is not called this yet, but as night follows day, cost containment, DRGs, disenfranchisements or limited health care benefits are but a harbinger of what is to follow.

In my opinion, the underlying philosophy which has brought about this radical change in our society is the utilitarian concept of the greatest good for the greatest number, with the government calling the shots as to who is entitled to what. This concept avoids the individual and his needs, medical or otherwise, and places the state in the arbitrary position of allocating resources. One does not have to be a genius to see where this utilitarian ethic, backed by the government, will lead. Chronic renal dialysis centers will be underfunded, marginal hospitals will be forced to close where they may be most needed, older chronically ill people will not have the opportunity to be restored to their former state of health and critically ill infants will be deprived of lifesaving measures, all in the name of "quality of life" and a "waste of limited resources."

We know that this turn-around in the health care policy of our

nation is unnecessary, but one thing it does show us is the underlying values which this nation espouses. This nation is unwilling to commit its wealth and resources to the least members of its society. It has enough money to build a huge defense establishment, to finance Third World countries, to back the debts of many countries, to waste taxpayers' money in bloated, wasteful bureaucracies and to squander its precious funds on countless questionable and ill-conceived projects, but it does not have enough money to provide for the health care needs of its citizens. Business and industry have not changed their stripes in this regard. While its corporate executives line their pockets with enormous salaries and bonuses, they deprive their employees of hard-earned wages and benefits, all in the name of cost containment and competitiveness. The name of the game is to keep health care costs below 10.5% of the gross national product, no matter what this implies.

In my humble opinion, 20.5% of the GNP would be well spent on health care. The good health of our citizens is a precious economic and spiritual resource of this nation and for the world. It will be a more productive nation as a result and be able to do more, not only for itself, but for all countries which look to us for help. However, the movers and shakers of this world must be converted to this apostolic view and turn away from their utilitarian ethic. They must return to the view of Pope John Paul II, namely, the sacred dignity of man and all that this implies.

And so, when people ask me what is our mission as Catholic physicians in this neo-pagan world, I say: "Give witness to Jesus Christ now, and His message in this world, whether it be in the doctors' lounge in the hospital, the hospital staff meeting, the hospital wards, at medical or professional society meetings and state or congressional hearings. Give witness to Christian values in everything you are and be like a beacon shining through the dark night of this world. Be a positive influence by being Christ to those who do not know Him."

The effect of Christ upon our lives is His "light shining before men" and His influence to change the world to His view is accomplished through us and His Church. Only through Him and with Him and in Him will change be brought about, much as He changed the whole Mediterranean world during the first three centuries following His death on the cross. He is with us today, and ultimately will prevail, as He foretold. We are constantly reassured by the words of Christ which tell us that He will be with us always, even to the end of the world.

— John P. Mullooly, M.D.
Editor

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St. Louis, Missouri