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Nicholas T. Elko

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From the Episcopal Advisor...

Reflections on Reaching Life's Summit

Nicholas T. Elko, D.D.

The auxiliary archbishop of Cincinnati, Archbishop Elko, episcopal advisor to the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds, has a wide background in oriental studies. He has been notably active in the rehabilitation of Iron Curtain people and priests.



With retirement near, one is reaching the summit of life. St. Bernard, an Alpine mountain climber, compares our earthly sojourn to the climbing of a peak. He refers to the winding passes and narrow steppes and rugged terrain with rumbling thunder and lightning as the figurative portrayal of our ascent during the years; just as in scaling rocks and stepping through snow and fog, our life is full of apprehension and anxiety about what is ahead. Then the saint says, "When the peak comes in sight and you are there, you look down and suddenly everything looks clearer. The sweet mystery of life's trail unravels itself and its purpose as we strive heavenward."

As a priest, I joined the long line of those who answered the call to the altar to bring the Eucharistic Sacrifice to the heavenly Father, be a mediator between God and man, bring earth near to heaven, and offer souls who are baptized as gifts to the Father in heaven.

There was a period, when I was 17, of making the choice which would last into the 70s. The deliberation had to wait for inspiration. The thought of being a physician presented itself — one who would

sustain the health of the body in a patient, fortifying the temple of the soul and helping to preserve the physical well-being of those under one's care. The responsibility looked so serious — to have in one's hands the life of another — but what a commendable vocation and secret trust with God the Creator.

What a privilege to act congruently with nature and the healing hand of Him Who made the body. But how serious is the concern when one whom the physician has sought to heal dies. But there is no imputability when the doctor has extended himself and done his very best, then let the Creator of the body do the rest.

In spite of the high calling involving physiology and health there is the still higher calling involving theology and an eternal soul. He who treats the body can at least dismiss the care, for his responsibility ends at its demise. For a priest, however, a doctor of the soul, an administrator of the sacraments, a provider of the Holy Eucharist, a spiritual confessor, the effects of his care extend beyond Judgment Day.

The selection of the priesthood was finalized by the model exemplification of this calling by model priests. The light leading to the seminary was brightened by a family physician who was a daily communicant and encouraged me to follow the vocation. The full clasp of the hand of Our Lord was the strong supplement of prayer of my good parents and friends.

As the episcopacy was placed upon my shoulders, responsibility grew. It was no longer just the laity pleading for God's love and mercy through a priest, but it was priests seeking an archpastoral guidance from one whose red cap symbolized complete sacrifice, even to a martyrdom of blood. They put a crosier in the hand of a bishop when he is ordained to remind him to lead the pastors of people with a gentleness and assist the altar brothers to lead others along the narrow path that the Church directs for a successful climb above the confines of an immoral world.

Congruent with the directives of Vatican Council II, a bishop is pleased to see around him a laity which follows the guide signs of true papal magisterial teachings. A bishop's notice especially falls on leaders who can influence the Catholic community, on professional people who, like a bishop, by providential happening are on a level to be seen as examples of genuine Catholic living.

One of my privileges has been associated with the Catholic Physicians' Guilds. It has been an edification to associate, assemble and pray with my valued friends, the physicians. The manifestation of their faith at every conference surfaces so beautifully at their daily attendance at Mass, a reverential reception of the Holy Eucharist, and a humble plea to the Savior to bring temporal benefits to the bodies which they treat, a subtle silent reverence of the Lamb of God in the Host, the only way to see God face-to-face in this world. There was an instance where two members, after having endured a tiresome six-hour

flight to a distant convention meeting, confronted me with the question, "Could we make a noonday Mass somewhere?"

The obstetricians, the first to see a woman become a mother, show such a love for the Mother of God. The praying of the rosary is always a part of the program. It was a pleasure to hand a rosary to a member who had misplaced his. He said he never retired without a prayer to the Virgin Mary.

Both popes, Paul VI and John Paul II, have acknowledged our annual salutation to them as Vicars of Christ and author and sponsor of the document, *Humanae Vitae*. Likewise, the joint petition to the present Holy Father, requesting that the Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary be made a holyday of obligation is reflective of the spiritual conviction that life begins at conception and this holyday would exemplify this belief.

It was commendatory when one of our members reflected his consistent practice of not only corporal, but spiritual acts of charity. Having received the papal blessing, he inquired if it was applicable to the soul of a patient recently lost to carcinoma.

Even Louis Pasteur would be pleased to know that men of medical science are also men of religion.

As one climbs the mountain, one is so appreciative of other climbers who are cherished friends and jointly are tied together in spiritual and bodily security to reach the salvation of God's mountain.