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## Christ in the Medical Student

T. Murphy Goodwin

*Medical student T. Murphy Goodwin gave the following address at the 1982 convention of the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds.*

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I am pleased and honored to speak to you. My contact with the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds, prior to meeting your president, Doctor Frelinger last year, was through your outstanding journal, the *Linaere Quarterly*. It has always seemed free from the partisanship so characteristic of our public debate today, dedicated to the truth and not fearing to air controversy, always retaining that unique perspective which our Faith gives us. I have noticed, too, especially in the editorials of Dr. Mullooly, an ongoing concern with the life of the Catholic medical student. Recalling some of his trenchant observations, I wondered what I could add, especially speaking to this gathering which includes many who have studied the status of the Catholic medical student and medical education in general, with far more diligence than I have. The answer, of course, is simply perspective. My experience is limited, especially in regard to Catholic medical schools. But from what I have heard from friends at other institutions and from what I have read, I think that students elsewhere share similar experiences.

During my three and one-half years in medical school at the University of Southern California, we have established a Catholic students' group based around a weekly Mass and a social gathering. The numbers waxed and waned with the exam schedule and with the change of services, and I must concede that there have been times when we were glad that Our Lord did not stipulate three as the number to be gathered in His name before He would be among us. Still, with a nucleus of regulars, we have been able to sponsor speakers on a variety of subjects. We have created an atmosphere to permit some exchange of important ideas, and a degree of fellowship. But our

modest successes have served to reveal more fundamental challenges, and I would like to share some of my perspectives on these challenges with you and the tremendous opportunities which I think they offer.

Time and again, both in personal encounters and round table discussions with other members of our Catholic students' group, I have heard some vexing point of moral or philosophical complexity suddenly exorcised with the familiar expression, "What *I* believe is right for *me*, but I can't say for anyone else," or, "As Catholics, we may hold that to be true, but we cannot apply it to everyone else." There is no other statement that is calculated to elicit a more ready nod of approval. This is the one dogma which is acceptable. What is true for *you* may not be true for *me*. It is really no surprise to hear it in our day and age, but there, among a group of dedicated Catholic medical students, coming weekly to Mass and sharing their experiences and here among those who must be Christ's witnesses, often alone, in their professional lives ahead, this is of more concern.

In many respects, the Catholic medical student is no different from his Catholic contemporary. He is the product of an era of educational flux and uncertainty within the Church. He is often less well-equipped to articulate his Faith or to defend it intellectually. Into the relative vacuum of this background has been drawn inevitably the pervasive credo of our era, the sort of indifferentism which I have described.

There are active forces within the medical educational establishment as well which insist on their own form of this message. In the lecture hall, in personal encounters with students, the message is, "Leave your beliefs out of your professional life. They have no place there. All your beliefs are your own; I have mine, the patient has his. They will only impede a rational discussion." During our second year, in a behavioral science lecture, one teacher was presenting the case of a father who involved his child in pornography from the point of view of cultural taboo. A fellow a few rows in front of me held up his hand and naively suggested that there were certain things about child pornography that were wrong in themselves. The teacher looked nothing short of stunned, afraid that the Spanish Inquisition was going to be revived right in his class. This student's beliefs were unwelcome. They had no place in the rational discussion.

There is another and related view which finds implicit and sometimes explicit expression from the podium. That is that science has, within its own methods, the means to explain the axioms on which it is based. This is an old fallacy, but one which we are meeting more frequently in our age of technological supremacy. God is merely an imprecise impediment to progress.

The effect of all these forces which I have described is, I believe, to split up the life of Christ within the medical student. Some parts of his Faith are allowed, even encouraged, to flourish. But in what might be

called the intellectual life — and for the doctor, this includes his professional life — his Faith is challenged.

At present, the popular culture, for some reasons profound and some trivial, is more understanding of certain manifestations of our Faith. We are not challenged in the main to defend our actions concerned with social justice, as long as they stay within the proper boundaries. We are not made to defend our habits of the spiritual life in general. In both of these areas as examples, a great wealth of spirituality and concern for fellow man has been revealed within the community in and around the medical center as we have come to know one another. I do not wish to seem to de-emphasize the importance of these expressions of our Faith in any way. But what can they signify if we deny the foundation of Christ's teaching? Can we allow them to be split off from the rest of our Faith? Can we stand with Pilate, asking, "What is truth?" and still follow Christ on His difficult journey?

One of the more active groups on our medical campus is the Christian Fellowship, which embraces students of many Protestant denominations, and some Catholic students as well, for the purpose of support and spiritual community. This group provides an interesting foil to the situation among Catholic students on our campus. Many of their members are among the most outstanding examples of consideration and thoughtfulness in their work with colleagues and patients. Their attitude seems to be a constant reflection of their Faith. But I would not have believed the startling heterogeneity of opinions on almost any issue of medical/moral controversy which I have encountered. As one member, a very good friend of mine, put it, "I have explored many denominations, and in general, I am drawn to those that are not intent on telling me what is right and wrong." His opinion does not express that of all the members by any means, but it finds a forum within the group.

And that attitude has a certain appeal, especially to the young. No one wants to appear judgmental or dogmatic in this day and age. But the Church is explicit about her teaching authority. She insists on the fullness of Christ's legacy. This is the reason, I believe, for the tension I have found within and among many of the Catholic medical students I have met. The pressure of the popular mind is strongly felt. It tells us that the Church is, at best, an impediment, and, at worst, an active force depriving individuals of their rights. The Church as teacher and guardian of the truth is a distant, impenetrable body whose pronouncements, so far as they are known, hang like the albatross around the student's neck as he plies the seas of progress.

On the very spot where joy and hope should stand, a certain negativism, directed at the Church, often takes hold. I believe there is a need to reaffirm the direct relationship between the teaching of Christ and that of His Church. There is a need to remind one another that

Christ Himself did not hesitate to affirm unequivocally what seemed difficult and unpalatable to many of His followers. In the sixth chapter of John, Jesus tells His followers:

I am the living Bread which has come down from Heaven. Anyone who eats this Bread will live forever.

St. John tells us that, after hearing this, many of his followers said, "This is intolerable language. How could anyone accept it?" And after this, many of His disciples left him.

Perhaps at this point you are wondering where I perceive the opportunity in this situation. I may sound like I am ready to pull up the drawbridge and boil the pitch against the infidel. But I really do see an opportunity, and I think that a frank assessment will set us on a sure footing to exercise it. The sober result which I quoted above is not where St. John leaves us:

Then Jesus said to the Twelve, "What about you? Do you want to go away, too?" Simon Peter answered, "Lord, who shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe, we know, that You are the Holy One of God."

This I take as a sort of model of our situation. Surely Christ's words were as perplexing to Peter as they were to those who walked away, and they would remain so until long after the crucifixion. But contrasted to the challenge to the Faith presented to those who left is Peter's simple profession of faith. Christ is the great gift, Who gives meaning to the world, and to each of our lives. In Him, a prohibition of some sort may really be an invitation to a greater act of love. A difficult teaching is first and foremost an invitation to a deeper understanding; a personal responsibility to witness is a chance for the Lord Himself to work through us. Christ in His Church is not a bastion defending a few dry documents of faith. He is like a spring bubbling forth life to a dessicated world, and in the very challenges of our Faith, we must find, as Peter did, the message of eternal life.

How is this affirmative way of looking at our Faith to be instilled at this time? Who will bring to the physician the knowledge of the strength and peace that Christ can bring, not just in his personal life, but also in his professional life? The medical student has 20 years of family, media, and school influence, but for all this, he is remarkably malleable. The process of medical education brings the student into an entirely new world. There is a strong sense of "leaving the rest behind," and always, there is a groping for models. Whom will I take as my guide in this new life? The power of the mentor is inestimable. And if that mentor is a person alive in the faith, prayerful, finding God in his or her fellow man and, in answer to the challenges that I have attempted to define, if that mentor is a person familiar and comfortable with the teachings of the Church, drawing strength from

them, able to see in them, as Peter did, the message of eternal life, what a great benefit to our future physicians.

I am pleased to be able to share these reflections with you because you are a rich source of the type of model so needed by the Catholic medical student today. I know that some of you are involving medical students and house officers in the work of your guilds already, and this is exciting. I do not think I go too far in saying that participation in this work must be among the most important missions of Catholic physicians today. The need is tremendous. In Los Angeles, at the County Medical Center, the informal efforts of a few outstanding physicians have often caused us to reflect on what more could be accomplished with a well-supported, organized effort. I know such a need exists elsewhere as well. I would like to encourage those of you who are active to expand your praiseworthy efforts, and invite your colleagues in different cities to take up this important mission. I have no doubt that you will find a great response.

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