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The Charism of Healing in the Health Care Profession

Barbara Shlemon, R.N.

Actively involved in the ministry of healing since 1965, the author has traveled nationally and internationally, directing retreats and workshops as well as addressing conferences and conventions. She was instrumental in forming the Association of Christian Therapists and currently is a member of its board of directors.

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The Old Testament book of Sirach (38:1) offers the following injunction:

“Honor the doctor with the honor that is his due
in return for his services;
For he too has been created by the Lord.
Healing itself comes from the Most High,
like the *gift* from a King.”

These ancient words are becoming increasingly significant for today's physicians as the Catholic Church expands her definition of *vocation* to include members of the health care profession.

Catholic theologian Father Bernard Haring recently presented a new vision of the ministry of health care as it pertains to the Church's

responsibility to the sick — *The Healing Mission of the Church in the Coming Decades*.¹ Father Haring states: "We have to promote the sense of vocation in the choice of professions. The healer should rank very high in this respect. At the same time there should be public acknowledgment of this vocation . . . doctors, nurses and allied helpers who are not only professionally but also personally 'expert' in theological medicine in the sense of therapeutic soteriology. The whole proposal assumes that somehow we can bring home the model of 'wounded healer' to health care professionals and not only on the humanistic level but also on the level of faith."²

Those who dedicate their lives to the practice of medicine should have little difficulty recognizing that this profession involves answering a "call" to serve because it is nearly impossible to deal with the suffering sick without some sort of supernatural strength. It matters not whether this inner resource is labeled as grace; the results speak for themselves.

Physicians who acknowledge the art of medicine as a "gift from a King" are becoming more numerous and visible within the profession. Among the organizations helping to foster this open attitude toward spirituality is the Christian Medical Foundation, established by Dr. William S. Reed, a Tampa, Florida surgeon.³ During the past ten years, hundreds have attended CMF's yearly conferences dealing with various moral and religious topics which confront the Christian doctor. The foundation's primary function, as expressed in its statement of purpose, is toward the physician himself — "concerned with his salvation and his being filled with and controlled by the Holy Spirit." This organization is non-denominational and directs its emphasis entirely toward physicians.

In 1975, a seed of a vision was planted at a workshop given at Mt. Augustine Retreat Center in Staten Island, New York. The workshop focused on Christian healing prayer and the responsibility of today's Catholic to exercise the gifts of healing, just as the early Church exercised them. Although this workshop was open to anyone who might be interested in spending five days discussing the subject, a large portion of the group was health care professionals, i.e., physicians, nurses and psychotherapists.

As these persons met for discussion and prayer, a common need began to be expressed. Each felt his professional life tended to isolate him from other Christians. There was a deep desire to have the freedom to regularly share on a spiritual level with others whose lives were given in service to the health and mental health fields. Excitement mounted as the participants agreed to form an organization which might begin to meet this need, and the Association of Christian Therapists (ACT) was born. It numbers nearly 2,000 persons and has become internationally known as members now apply from dozens of countries outside the United States.⁴

One participant in the formative discussions at Mt. Augustine, Father Albert Fredette, returned to his position as director of pastoral care at St. Vincent Hospital and Medical Center in Toledo, Ohio. There he shared with the hospital administrator, Sister Dorothy Cooper, the vision of what the association hoped to accomplish. She, too, became enthusiastic about the plan and offered not only a secretary but also all the office equipment and supplies necessary to organize the fledgling group. Since there were no funds initially available for the operation of ACT, this generous offer was quickly accepted and provided the encouragement necessary to keep the dream alive. Father Fredette became ACT's first president, working long hours outside of his regular job to draw up a charter and by-laws and obtain the necessary data for a non-profit, tax-exempt organization.

The ACT central office was eventually moved to Rochester, New York when enough funds became available through donations and membership fees to rent an office and hire the appropriate personnel to oversee the many activities of the organization. Dr. Martin Lynch, a clinical psychologist, and his wife, Sally, a registered nurse, share the title of executive directors of ACT. A board of directors, elected from the membership, meets regularly to seek God's plan for the continued growth of the association.

The purpose of the Association of Christian Therapists is very simple: to restore the charism of healing to the profession of medicine. Through bi-yearly conferences and publications (*The Journal of Christian Healing* and *Interact* newsletter), it endeavors to form a support network to promote the spiritual/emotional growth of its members.

Although the organization calls itself the Association of *Christian* Therapists, it is primarily a Roman Catholic association that is open to all Christian denominations. Conferences present teachings on moral/spiritual issues which only reflect Catholic tradition and each conference revolves around the daily celebration of the liturgy.

These meetings, which gather 300 or more participants, focus on issues pertaining to the integration of prayer and medicine. Themes of past conferences include: "Healing Prayer and the Cancer Patient," "Perfect Love Casts Out Fear — How Does Fear Affect Me and My Patients?" and "The Healing Power of the Cross: Christ's View of Suffering."

While not disregarding the importance of the talks given at these conferences, the membership appears to obtain great strength from sharing their lives with one another. Afternoons are geared to bringing members representing various medical disciplines together in small groups to allow time for discussion and prayer. Most physicians find these sessions offer them an opportunity to talk about their own needs with other physicians who can understand the pain and isolation often involved with the practice of medicine. They find themselves in

an environment of love and compassion where they can be vulnerable in admitting fears and confronting failures. Many have remarked that ACT is the *only* organization which permits the physician to be human and allows him to discard the role of healer for a few days so that he can be healed.

The evening celebration of liturgy emphasizes union with Jesus Christ Who is the only Healer. Two evenings during the week are set aside for personal ministry, encouraging all conference participants to receive more of God's graces for their work.

ACT is open for professional membership to all persons who are academically credentialed as health care professionals. An associate membership is available to Christians working in the healing ministry under the supervision of a professional. Spouses of professional members are also included in this category and are eligible to attend the conferences and regional meetings. Due to the rapid growth of ACT over the past seven years, it has become necessary to divide the membership into 22 regions. These regions make it possible for members to meet together more often than twice a year and provide ongoing opportunities for fellowship and prayer.

A network of Christian counseling centers is emerging from ACT's membership. These centers combine modern psychotherapeutic tools with spiritual direction, recognizing the wholistic nature of those seeking wellness. From the Catholic-Christian perspective, a person cannot progress in wholeness unless his spiritual needs as well as his physical/psychological needs are attended to. Life in today's world has to include repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and right-ordered relating to God and to others.

ACT does not stress methodologies and techniques to be added to the medical armamentarium, but encourages a deepening of relationship between God and man which implies dependence on His sovereign power. It emphasizes the responsibility of all Christians to accept the commission given to us by Jesus Christ, "I tell you most solemnly, whoever believes in Me will perform the same works that I do myself and even greater works than these will you do because I go to the Father" (John 14:2). The works that Jesus performed during His three-year public ministry are clearly documented for us in the Gospels. Nearly all His time was taken up with touching, caring, and curing those who came to Him in need. The health care profession is a continuation of the ministry of Jesus when it is exercised as an apostolate.

The importance of the spiritual dimension of patient care was never more acute than in today's society, yet the number of ordained clergy who have held the responsibility for this area of concern is declining very rapidly. The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate recently reported that the number of Catholic seminarians has fallen

52 percent since 1968 and continues to show a decrease every year. Part of the answer to this dilemma, as advocated by Father Haring in his report, is a deeper understanding of the vocation attached to care of the sick. Those who have accepted medicine as a "call" from God, who daily dedicate themselves and their work to Jesus Christ, who seek to live Christian principles in the practice of their profession — these are the ministers in today's Church.

Organizations such as ACT are helping to insure the continuation of growth in personal holiness for the members of the health care professions.

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