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Christian Challenge and the Disadvantaged

Rev. Virgil Elizondo

Father Elizondo, president of the Mexican-American Cultural Center in San Antonio and a professor of theology, is a noted lecturer and author. The following is the address he gave at the 1981 annual meeting of the NFCPG.



It is a very special privilege for me to have the opportunity of addressing the Catholic Physicians' Guilds of the United States. You are very important in the life of the Church for the ministry of healing has always been one of the basic elements of our Christian mission. The entire mission of the Church might well be recapitulated in one simple phrase of Jesus: "I came that you might have life and have it in abundance" (Jn 10:10).

I. The Ministry of Healing

One of the most consistent characteristics of Jesus was that He was a healer. People came to Him to be cured. He did not turn them away or disappoint them. A good translation of the "justice of God" is the word "rehabilitation." Everyone who came to Jesus was cured and rehabilitated — physically, mentally and spiritually. When the disciples of John the Baptist came to ask if He was the Messiah, He answered in medical terms. He told them to go back and report what they had seen: "The blind recover their sight, cripples walk, lepers are cured,

the deaf hear, dead men are raised to life, and the poor have the good news preached to them" (Mt. 11:4-5).

Jesus made the healing ministry one of the main signs of the presence of the kingdom of God. There is no doubt that from the very beginning, Jesus intended healing to be one of the privileged activities of His followers. He told His disciples: "In whatever city you go, cure the sick there" (Lk. 10:8).

Throughout the ages, the Church has struggled to live out this mandate. Medical missionaries have gone to the most undesirable places to serve the health needs of the poor and unwanted of the world. And many who have stayed at home have joyfully given of their time and talents to serve the poor of our own society. Others have located their practice where people find themselves in greatest need. All these efforts are a direct continuation of the mission of Christ Himself.

Jesus told His disciples: "I solemnly assure you, the man who has faith in me will do the works I do, and far greater than these" (Jn. 14:12). These words are certainly true beyond the wildest imagination of the early Christians and even of the first followers of Jesus. Through science, technology and your own personal skills, you are daily performing more miracles, and much greater ones, than Jesus ever performed in His life.

Furthermore, you are not only curing the sick, but you are also improving the quality of life of millions of people. You are no longer just fighting disease; you are promoting health and life itself. Through your dedication, many people are truly coming into an abundance of life.

II. Physicians as Christian Ministers

As Christian physicians, you participate in the priesthood of Christ in a very special way. God became man, suffered and gave His life so that we might live. This voluntary offering of self for the sake of others is the very core of Christian priesthood — the priesthood of all the baptized. It is through the giving of self for the sake of others that the world, which is destroying itself through the sinfulness of egoism, greed, materialism and jealousy, will be redeemed — or to use a better word, rehabilitated. This marks the beginning of the new creation. And you, Christian physicians, are helping to bring it about.

In your work as Christian physicians, you are cooperating with God in a very special way in the redemption of humanity. Through your work, you share in the creative act of God Who brought order out of the chaos and life out of death. God made the world, not so that we would be enslaved by it, but rather so that we would enjoy it.

As physicians, you are called upon to develop the skills necessary for your profession. Faith is no substitute for science and know-how. Rather, faith and science need one another. As Christians, you are

called to a very special style of healing which in no way lessens your professionalism, but rather brings an additional dimension into your practice. You are aware that you are not dealing only with disease or with bodies. You work with human persons. The face of Christ is in the faces of everyone, but especially in the poorest and most repulsive of men and women. It is the whole person who is the image of God and the subject of health. With God's help, we can see and appreciate the beauty and dignity of God in every patient. In the presence of patients, especially those most disfigured and abominable according to human standards, you are in the presence of God! In them, you have a living vision of the sacred.

When, humanly speaking, we are repulsed by the patient's appearance, we need God's help to assist us in going beyond our human limitations so as to see the divine which is always present in the human. Do not be afraid to admit your weakness and beg for God's help, for it is in our very openness to God that we are filled with His strength.

The Christian physician must commit himself/herself, in the words of Pope John Paul II, to a repersonalization of medicine. Your concern for the person and for all those who enter closely into the person's life must be a constant characteristic of your ministry.

Your own faith communicates itself to others and will give you a presence that will inspire calmness and confidence in your patients. If you are truly men and women of faith, you will know that even by doing everything you can do, with the best equipment and the maximum conditions, the final results are still in God's providence. Faith should never be a substitute for mediocrity, but it does enable even excellence to be aware of its own limitations. You are great, but you are not God. Strive to be great, for the sake of your patients, but be comfortable in your limitations, for in the ultimate analysis, it is God Who brings your work to completion. As Christians we pray, "Your will be done." But, we pray it with the absolute certitude that "God makes all things work together for the good of those who have been called according to His desire" (Rom. 8:28). And you are those who have been called.

As Christian physicians, your primary concern — your privileged concern — must be for the poor, the outcasts of society. Jesus went out of His way to minister to the poor and to the outcasts of society. While money and prestige may be important, they can never be your privileged concern. Instead, you must give dedicated and selfless service, making a special effort to go out to those in greatest need.

Two of Pope John Paul II's favorite words are "creativity" and "boldness." You must be creative and bold in discovering new ways of taking health care and services to those who cannot afford them. Migrants, the undocumented, and people living in the barrios and ranchitos are often in poor health because they cannot afford to pay

for health care services. And the number of people who cannot afford health care is increasing. Often the greatest suffering is kept hidden. You physicians must become the voice of the voiceless, the defender of the defenseless, the power of the powerless. You must give out information and take a firm stand with pharmaceutical companies and hospitals. You must work, for example, to get legislation passed to ban certain dangerous pesticides. As Pope John Paul II says, when he goes out and speaks to the poor, you must also say, "I want to be your voice."

Enjoy your earthly rewards. But remember, we want you to be the leaders of the Church. Your ultimate reward should be to bring new life to the world, not to accumulate earthly accomplishments. Your goal must be not only to be a great physician, but also to be a physician whose style of ministry is the style of Jesus, so He can say, "Whatever you did for these, the least of My brethren, you did unto Me. Because I was hungry, you fed Me." But, for you most of all, "Because I was sick, you comforted Me."

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