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Similarities in the Life of St. Joseph and a Catholic Physician

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St. Joseph is a model for physicians. Both are identified with aspiration, inspiration and perspiration. Medical school days were days of suspense shadowed by scientific mystery. Joseph's life was an internship of faith before he became a foster father. His suspense can be compared to that of a medical student who feels uncertain of his competency. Yet, Joseph held on to aspirations. He had to. He was from the royal line of David. In his genealogy, however, there was a killer, David; a person of ill repute, Jezebel; and a Solomon, who liked opulence. Nevertheless, scripture reveals that the Messiah would be born of this lineage, regardless. Joseph's spouse was a virgin and remained a virgin, yet was with child. The Gospel reports him, "a just and good man" who never committed a wrong, yet he was human and was bewildered. There was a quandary about the situation. He had to make a decision and St. Luke writes, "He finally decided to divorce Mary, but quietly." In this we see how considerate, how understanding he was of the perfect body that was to give birth.

The physician, too, is at times overwhelmed by the responsibility placed in his hands and he must battle uncertainty because a decision has to be made. Will what he resolves to do result in harm to the person? God tested Joseph for such a period of time that he was very uncomfortable. His responsibility was to protect Mary. How could he please both God and her when what was evident in Mary appeared to be caused by a transgression? Time is not only a physical, but also a mental healer. In Joseph's case, his perplexity was healed after the time to test his faith and patience terminated. How grateful he must have been when the Lord said to him in a dream, "Do not be afraid to take Mary for your wife. That which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Joseph was thankful that a situation which he couldn't master himself was taken over by the Lord.

Just as communication between a patient and a physician is sometimes difficult, so too, the communication between Mary and Joseph was very tenuous. Imagine how much Mary must have appreciated Joseph's propriety. She knew what he thought and yet she did not make the first move to express herself. She was passive in the matter. How much a physician must appreciate the trust of a patient not only in his skill, but also in his wisdom. Just as Mary placed herself into the hands of a just man, a believing patient contributes so much to the dual process of cooperation by eloquent silence. Results can accrue from being amenable to a doctor's or surgeon's methodical care because even if there isn't an external expression of trust in some divine intervention, there is an interior one. Those who have the faith must be so pleased when a doctor admits that he is only God's repairman!

As Joseph gained Mary's respect, so too the medical man gains respect by the gift of prudence. What joy there is in the heart of a patient whose operation has been a success or whose malady has been contained, when the physician says, "You can go home tomorrow." He still does it with an apprehension and, when he hopes there are no complications, he might quickly lift his eyes heavenward. He knows that after he has done his best, it is up to God and nature to handle the rest of the healing process.

Like Joseph and Mary who, after having found the boy Jesus in the temple, reprimanded Him for what seemed to be inconsideration, so too, the physician must admonish his patient to be careful, "lest something worse happen to you." In other words, the well-being of the person is contingent on whether he masters the conflict between self-control and self-abuse. Patients, like the boy Jesus, might seek to vindicate themselves for what they do. After Jesus said that He was busy about His Father's business, He heard the parental reply, "We have been looking for you anxiously." Is that not true of every good doctor? He is anxious about his patients after he has treated them. He wants to know the success of his work. St. Luke writes that Joseph

and Mary, "did not understand what he spoke of." The doctor, too, may not understand how the inherited genes or mental propensities of a person might cause him or her to act the way he or she does.

Years before the finding in the temple, Joseph, the humble man, was apprehensive on that long and tedious journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Where would the birth take place? Imagine the frustration when door after door closed to this perfect man. No hospitality or cordiality was shown. If those innkeepers would only have known that the Heavenly Father's Son was asking to be invited under their roofs, surely they would have accepted Him and treated Him with utmost respect. Often a physician might speculate on why God appears to be at such a distance when the patient is not responding to treatment. Why isn't there a more tangible manifestation of God's presence? Why doesn't such a critical situation draw immediate heavenly assistance? A good question! Now, what is the answer? The answer is that there are no clocks or calendars in heaven. God has an eternity to act. He has no such thing as time. Thus, even Joseph had to endure the divine gradual plan. But after this vital test and the humiliation of the crib and stable with animals and not humans, a birth — the greatest of all births — came about. There was a sudden blast of trumpets from heaven, angels hovered near, the midnight blue sky was so brightened by a huge star that Joseph, Mary and the Child were in the spotlight. Not one but three kings came to pay Him homage and bow to this self-effacement of divinity. The shepherds welcomed the newborn King. Angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest."

A physician finds his life a strain, yet duty urges him on as Joseph was urged on. What satisfaction of mind comes about when his skill brings success! It is for the glory of God that he coordinates his human efforts with heaven's power and demanding standards of humility that eventually lead to holiness.
