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President's Page: Tradition

Andrew J. Peters

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President's Page



Tradition

The breakdown of the traditional, moral and civil foundations began in recent times with the Kent State incident in the 1960's. Our youth broke the tradition of patriotism by refusing to fight and die for what they thought was an unjust war.

At approximately the same time, our youth began to experiment with mind-altering drugs like marijuana and heroin, as they are still doing today. This substance abuse broke the tradition of respect for one's own well being. Then, the 1970's brought the Watergate scandal, and President Richard Nixon lost the respect of a nation. The tradition of respect for authority now faltered.

The authority of the Church has also lost ground during the past two decades. In the 1960's, the birth control pill became popular as an alternative for couples who followed the Church's teachings forbidding mechanical birth control, but were unable to manage the rhythm method. This transgression from the authority of the Church is yet another example of the disregard for tradition, as is the case with the Church leaders who opposed the 1967 papal encyclical, "Humanae Vitae."

The traditions of marriage, of celibacy in the single state, and of heterosexuality have disintegrated. Some church leaders have publicly accepted premarital intercourse, abortion and homosexuality as alternate lifestyles. Even the scourge of AIDS is a result of the disregard for the established traditions of modesty and chastity.

So Catholic physicians are now confronted with a nation lacking strong leadership in the authorities of the church, government and family. Where do we stand in this apparent turmoil? What does tradition mean for us? Essentially, it means the transferral of standards and values from one generation to the next. But with these "standards" in a constant state of flux, should Catholic physicians embrace every new "discovery" in the field of human development, or should they stand strong and uphold the time honored tradition of the church, government and medical profession?

Pope John Paul II's recent document, "Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation: Replies to Certain Questions of the Day", [*Editor's note: Document is printed in this issue.*] lends us a strong example of how we can stand steady and proclaim in the traditions that will inspire our society to make correct moral decisions. This concept of docility in accepting the Pope's teachings as coming from God will help us establish a solid foundation for future generations.

We should pray to the Holy Spirit for guidance in our roles as physicians: "The Holy Spirit, through the gift of counsel, perfects an individual with regard to choosing what is to be done in an individual situation."¹ It is morally wrong for us to tell our patients their choices are acceptable when they are wrong, whether they be abortions or artificial insemination. It takes great courage to express to our patients what we know to be the truth, and great charity to help them make the proper moral decisions.

As Catholic physicians, we should stand behind the papal authority and set a strong example for our patients, families, clergy and government. Ethics is acting as intelligent, loving, human beings, using moral unity based on tradition as the common bond.

The papal document should be seen as the highest standard for which to strive. As St. Thomas said: "No one is sufficient to himself in regard to all things."² Although our humanness may not always permit us to reach His high ideals, we should still seek perfection.

We cannot make moral judgments about the behavior of our patients, but we must stand ready to offer counseling and sympathy. Yet reinforcing the image of good to our patients will cause them to continue to look up to us for the ideal. We must be standard bearers in today's society.

1. St. Thomas II, IIg 52, A.1.

2. Summa Theologiae Moralis, Merkel Bach, O.P., 1938

— Andrew J. Peters, M.D.
President, NFCPG