

November 2005

Guest Editorial: The Pastoral Care of the Physician

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Recommended Citation

Burke, Greg F. (2005) "Guest Editorial: The Pastoral Care of the Physician," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 72 : No. 4 , Article 1.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol72/iss4/1>

The Pastoral Care of the Physician

The spiritual direction of physicians offers unique opportunities and challenges for a pastor responsible for the care of souls. Physicians find themselves at the forefront of the most pressing moral issues of our day but, more importantly, deeply involved in the life and death experiences of their patients. Such experiences can be emotionally and physically draining, leaving the physician in need of spiritual renewal. Catholic doctors may especially search for solace in the sacramental moments which bless and define the Church – Christ's real presence in the world. Pastors' understanding of the physicians' needs will enhance the relationship as they realize their shared mission as healers in a broken world.

There are several ways in which priests and physicians have a mutual vocational calling. Both are asked to serve the ill, whether the illness is spiritual or physical in origin. They are also required to live a life of virtue, placing the needs of others often before their own. The priest has his flock, the physician his or her "practice." Confidentiality in the exam room as well as the confessional is considered an absolute necessity. Both penitents and patients share intimate and often deeply humbling aspects of their lives with their priest or physician, every expectation of unbroken trust. A kind word or, unfortunately all too often, an unkind remark may have lasting effects based on the valued nature of the relationship. Finally, both face human life at its best and worst moments, many times⁸ even in the same day. Such shared experiences should make the pastor and physician not only colleagues in the business of healing, but intimate friends bringing a perspective which is complimentary to the other.

Medical-moral issues confront the doctor daily – abortion, contraception, in vitro fertilization, embryonic stem cell research, and physician-assisted suicide, to name a few. The temptation to adopt a secular viewpoint on these issues can be great, and the physician needs the moral guidance of a firm, yet sensitive pastor. Issues may arise in the sacrament of penance that will need to be dealt with, with clarity and good, practical advice. On the other hand, the physician may serve as a consultant to the priest to educate him on the scientific and ethical aspects of these very moral issues. Here again, a collaborative friendship can develop leading to a fruitful expansion of Church teaching in these critical areas. The Church's teaching offers the most consistent and life-affirming

approach to bioethical dilemmas of our day. Such teaching must be boldly proclaimed by the pastor and physician alike. The clergy must teach on these issues with firmness, and the physician always gives good example in his or her personal and professional life.

In my own experience, I have enjoyed close relationships with parish priests, sometimes serving as their personal physician, and have been graced by this abundantly. We have shared medical information, personal experiences and, most importantly, encouraged each other in our mission of healing. I have confessed my faults to them and they, in turn, have consulted me for ethical guidance in real life pastoral situations. Without a doubt, the Lord blesses such collaboration.

Because of the bonds I have enjoyed with priests, I have felt comfortable contacting them whenever seriously ill Catholics needed Christ's presence in the sacrament of the anointing of the sick. I think it perfectly right and wholly appropriate for a doctor to recognize the spiritual needs of a patient and try to address them. Serving as an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion has allowed me to appreciate the importance of the pastoral care of the ill and suffering as I have brought the Lord to them in the sacramental gift of His very Body. Truly, I have been blessed by witnessing God's healing, not only of body but also of soul.

Finally, the sacrament of penance requires an examination of conscience. The physician must review his motivations, direct actions, and areas of cooperation with evil to make such an examination. A good confessor will know the special circumstances of a physician's life, both personally and professionally, and help to guide him/her to a more holy life. The confessor in particular must be aware and competent in the moral teachings of the Church; physicians are trained to know the reasons behind every recommendation and will respond well to reasoned pastoral explanations.

In summary, priests and physicians share much in common and should find much support in each other as they fulfill their vocation in life. Christ has given each a special and complimentary role to bring all persons to their full dignity, both in the temporal world and the world to come. I ask that all pastors not only pray for their doctor, but for all doctors. Please also know there are many physicians who pray daily for their priests, and for the priesthood in general, as God's special gift to the Church, his alter Christus.

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