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The Pope John XXI International Prize For Medical Ethics

EUGENE G. LAFORET, M.D.

Perhaps nowhere has the interface between time and eternity been so gracefully obscured as in Iberia. The land of St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. Theresa of Avila is also the land of Moses Maimonides and Amatus Lusitanus. Mystics and ecclesiasts, physicians and scientists, all have found the peninsula congenial, each to his own special needs. But unique even for Iberia was Petrus Hispanus: physician, priest, ophthalmologist, professor of physical science, pharmacologist, logician, and—as John XXI—vicar of Christ.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The son of a physician, Peter the Spaniard was born in Lisbon in 1215, an era when little distinction was made between Spain and Portugal.¹ After studying at the Cathedral school in his native city,² he matriculated at the University of Paris, where he was a fellow-pupil of Roger Bacon and student of Albertus Magnus and William Shyreswood.³ Here he studied logic, theology, and probably medicine, though some believe that his formal medical education was obtained at the more illustrious faculty of Montpellier. Returning to Portugal, Petrus took Holy Orders. From about 1249 to 1263 he occupied the chair of physic at the University of Seville. It was probably during this period that he wrote Euclidean Logic, a grammar of formal logic the popularity of several centuries, and Liber de Oculis, a treatise on ocular ophthalmology.

In 1268 he became medical advisor to Pope Gregory X whose two successors, Innocent V and Adrian V, ruled but briefly. Meeting at Viterbo on the death of Adrian V, the Consistory of Cardinals elected Petrus Hispanus—essentially a compromise candidate—to be the next pope. He assumed the name of John and was crowned at the Cathedral of Viterbo in September 1276.

During his short pontificate John XXI made strenuous and, by many standards, fruitless efforts to promote peace among Christian princes. He also negotiated with the Greeks for a union of the Eastern and Western Churches, a goal that remains unrealized many centuries after his death. As pope he directed the preparation of and himself supervised what was perhaps his most famous work, the Thesaurus Paeperum, a home medical guide emphasizing treatment and diet.⁴ Although none of his therapeutic concoctions has survived to be included in the current United States Pharmacopeia,⁵ he stressed the need for repeated experiments to determine the efficacy of new drugs and insisted that human rather than animal trial was the ultimate test.⁶

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“The Attitude of the Catholic Doctor Facing the Problem of Birth Control” was read at the Dublin congress in 1954. In 1958 Dr. Charles Mezanos of Hungary wrote on “Responsibility of the Doctor Facing the Modern World” and received the prize at the Brussels congress. The X International Congress was held in London in 1962, on which occasion the award went to

THE AWARD

That Petrus Hispanus was the only physician to become Pope lends him special stature as a symbolic person of Catholic medical ethics. That he should also have been a native of Lisbon is a source of special pride to the Portuguese.⁷ It therefore seemed particularly appropriate to the Portuguese Association of Catholic Physicians that an International Prize for Medical Ethics, instituted and sponsored by the Association, should be named in honor of their compatriot and colleague. Thus, in July 1951, the Pope John XXI International Prize for Medical Ethics was formally established at the V International Congress of Catholic Physicians in Paris. The award as constituted at the Paris congress consisted of a bronze medal (Fig. 1) and the sum of 5,000 Escudos offered quadrennially, administered by the Secretariat International des Médecins Catholiques in Brussels, an international competition is held every four years on an announced topic. The selected paper is read and the award presented at each International Congress of Catholic Physicians. The prize was won for the first time by Dr. I. Balaguer-Vintró of Spain, whose paper on

FIGURE 1. The Pope John XXI International Prize for Medical Ethics. Obverse of bronze medalion by contemporary Portuguese artist João da Silva, showing Petrus Hispanus as Pope John XXI. Appearing with the caduceus to the left are the years of his birth and death. On the right the seal of Portugal surmounts the arms of John XXI. The reverse depicts the scriptural scene of Christ curing the blind (Luke 18:41-42).
the United States for a paper on "The 'Hopeless' Case." The theme of the XI International Congress, to be held in Manila from November 2 to 6 this year, is "The Population Problem and the Doctor." Entries are invited for the fourth award of the Pope John XXI International Prize for Medical Ethics, particulars concerning which may be had from:

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Associação dos Médicos Portugueses
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Lisbon - I, Portugal

REFERENCES

1 Peter the Spanish has been dogged throughout history by confusions about his name. The appellation "Hispanus," applied to one born in what is now Portugal, should occasion no difficulty if viewed in historical context. His lineage as a Johannine pope, however, is still unsettled. According to most writers, he should have been John XX, as there were apparently only 19 Johns before him. In fact, on one of his seals he is indeed designated as John XX, but on his epitaph as John XXI. Numerous theories have been advanced to explain the discrepancy, none of which has been fully authenticated.


5 which takes as a subject of diatribe a common medical error.


7 In 1886 the Portuguese Ambassador to the Holy See, with the assistance of Pope Leopold XIII, erected a dedicatory monument at Vitoria to the memory of Peter Vasconcellos, calling him "Missionary of Portugal." In 1929 Edgar D. Faubion, later to become a Nobel laureate for his work in neurology, was invited to write a biography of his countryman who became pope; this was reprinted in Revista de Medicina published in Lisbon in 1940 by Lavinia Bertrand.


Editor's Note: Dr. Lafort was awarded the John XXI Medal in 1962, for his paper, "The 'Hopeless' Case." (cf. 4d: Aug. 1962, pp. 126-143.)

ABORTION

Part III

RT. REV. MSGR. PAUL V. HARRINGTON, J.C.L.

It is frightening and disillusioning to realize the extent to which important and influential medical societies and other influential authorities throughout the world are actively engaged in advocating and supporting the legalization of abortion laws on the national, state, and local level. Previous reference was made to the recent attempt of the Board of Trustees of the American Medical Association to influence the Board of Delegates to "take a step toward urging more liberal abortion and sterilization laws." The newspaper account stated "the Trustees wanted a doctor to have a legal right to perform an abortion if the pregnancy would greatly impair the health of the mother, or if the pregnancy resulted from incest or rape, or to prevent harm to an abnormal infant." The House of Delegates voted against supporting the legalization of abortion and sterilization but indicated that solutions for these problems must be found by the legislative action and reform in each state. This would seem to indicate that the House of Delegates was in favor of legislative and statutory reform but not of the support of bills that would be initiated before the individual State Assembly or Legislature.

In 1965, Anthony C. Belkerson, a lawyer and legislator, reintroduced a bill before the State Assembly in California a measure which would bring the law with reference to abortion in that State into conformity with current medical practice. Kummer and Leavy explain that the bill "clearly sets forth the procedures to be followed by physicians and law enforcement officials when therapeutic abortion may be indicated. It provided controls against abuse by requiring approval from hospital committees and, in some cases from the local district attorney or superior court. It permitted only licensed physicians in licensed hospitals to terminate pregnancy, whereas most abortion statutes lack these important restrictions." This bill, after several years of study, was reported out of the Criminal Procedures Committee but was allowed to die in the Ways and Means Committee and never reached the floor of the Lower House.

What is important and worth noting about this particular bill is the support it received from the medical profession while it was pending before the Assembly. Kummer and Leavy report "the bill received official support from the California Medical Association, the major national obstetrical and gynecological soci-