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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

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physic at the university of Siena. It was probably during this period that he wrote *Summulae Logicae*, a grammar of formal logic that maintained great popularity for several centuries and *Liber de Oculo*, a treatise on clinical 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, fruitful 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 Pauperum*, 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

The reign of the only physician-pope was destined to be as brief as it had been enlightening. On May 24, 1277, less than a year after ascending the papal throne, Pope John XXI was injured by the collapsing roof of his newly constructed study and laboratory. Six days later he was dead.

THE AWARD

That Petrus Hispanus was the only physician to become Pope lends him special stature as a symbolic patron 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 medallion (Fig. 1) and the sum of 5,000 Escudos, offered quadrennially. Administered by the Secrétariat 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. Balaguér-Vintró of Spain, whose paper on

"The Attitude of the Catholic Doctor Facing the Problem of Birth Control" was read at the Dublin congress in 1954. In 1958 Dr. Charles Méezaros 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



FIGURE 1. The Pope John XXI International Prize for Medical Ethics. Obverse of bronze medallion 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."⁸ 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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REFERENCES

¹ Peter the Spaniard 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.

² _____: Pope John XXI: short biographical sketch. *Catholic Med. Quart.* 14:109-110 1961.

³ Riesman, D.: A physician in the papal chair. *Ann. Med. Hist.* 5:291-300 1923.

⁴ Ober, W. B. _____ Conway, A. J.: John XXI — ophthalmologist, professor of physic, pope. *Eng. J. Med.* 273:39-40 1965.

⁵ which takes _____ view of such medicaments as a _____ rhoid ointment made by boiling _____ worm found under a rough stone" _____ seed oil.

⁶ Press, H. A. _____ hazards: undue emphasis harm _____ to medicine. *Issues in Current Med. Practice* 1:2-7 1964.

⁷ In 1886 the Portuguese Ambassador to the Holy See, with the assistance of Pope Leo XIII, erected _____ monument at Viterbo to the memory of Petrus Hispanus, terming him "Magnus Lux" of Portugal. And in 1929 Egas Moniz, later to become a Nobel laureate for his work in neurology, was moved to write a biography of his countryman who became pope; this was reprinted in *Revista da Medicina*, published in Lisbon in 1940 by Livraria Bertrand.

⁸ The "hopeless" case. *Arch. Int. Med.* 112:314-326 1962; O caso "desesperado." *Ação Médica* 27:78-105 1962.

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