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The Catholic Doctor and the Church

VERY REVEREND G. D. BOYLE, S.J.

We hear much these days of the apostolate of the laity; and I think it might help if we begin by clearing our minds on this subject. Every Christian is, in virtue of his Christian profession, an apostle, i.e. he is sent by God. God the Son was sent by the Father; He in His turn sent the Holy Ghost, and the Holy Ghost sent the apostles on their mission when he descended on them at the first Pentecost. That same Holy Ghost descended on each of us at our baptism and gave us our mission to bear witness to the truth, to spread abroad through the world the Gospel, the revelation which Christ was sent on earth to make known to us. This we are to do each in his own way according to the function allotted to him; some to administer the sacraments and preach the word of God as ordained priests; some as laymen to carry with them into the world in which they live the light of the Gospel through being the sort of persons they are, through the sort of views they express and the sort of life they lead.

In distinguishing between clerical and lay we think too much in terms of rank and dignity, of rulers and ruled, teachers and taught, almost first and second class citizens. We would do better to think with St. Paul in terms of variety of function. After all the Holy Father himself is no more a member of the Church than you or I. His function is unique, and that function rightly gives him a special rank and dignity; but the rank and dignity flow from the function, not vice versa. Your function, your contribution to the apostolate of the Church is no less real than his and

hardly less necessary for its fruitful performance. Indeed, in a recent speech to Catholic graduates His Holiness declared that it was the role of the laity to act as a bridge between the Church and the secular world. They are full members of the Church, and they are living in the world; and the Holy Father did not hesitate to add that, for that reason, because they have a foot in both camps, they are better qualified than the clergy to ensure that the world is not deprived of the message of Christian salvation. The *Civiltà Cattolica*, commenting on this and other recent papal declarations, had this to say: "The laity in the Church are not external minors who must merely listen and obey; they must help the hierarchical church with their advice and experience, which may be critical if necessary, but never bitter or harsh, so that it may carry out better its mission of preaching the Gospel to the world of the world of today which is not the world of yesterday, and whose needs the laity are best qualified to know and make known to the Church."

What, then, is the special function of the Catholic doctor in the Church? It is in his person that the teaching of the Church in medical matters is made known to the profession at large and, which is no less important, it is in his person that the thinking of the medical profession is in turn made available to the Church so that it may take its due place in moulding her conceptions and determining her decision.

What happens when an infallible decree is made? There is no claim to divine inspiration. There is no second

Pentecost about it; we have no reason to think that at the end of the present Council the Holy Ghost will descend on Their Eminences and Graces and Lordships in the form of parted tongues or in any other form. Infallibility is a negative rather than a positive quality, a guarantee that in her official teaching on matters concerning faith and morals the Church will not err. There is no guarantee that she will express the whole truth, or that she will express the truth in the best possible terms, or make her decrees at the most opportune moment. In order to ensure all this she has to go through the ordinary human processes of thought and study and consultation, and this for a matter of years, even centuries.

Meanwhile it is not for the laity to sit back and wait for the answer to be delivered to them on a plate. If the expressions "the Church thinking," "the Church studying" mean anything, they mean that the members of the Church think and study, and that means not only Bishops and priests and moral theologians, but you as well. Remember again what I said above about diversity of function. You have a vital contribution to make in your dual role as members of the Church and members of the medical profession with your own special knowledge and skill and experience. In the first instance, she needs your expert professional knowledge. No doubt the moral theologian can grub up sufficient knowledge of the medical side of the question to save himself from the more egregious errors. But it is unlikely that he will acquire sufficient to justify any full confidence that he has grasped the problem in all its ramifications. He must work hand in glove with you. If your professional knowledge and guidance are not forthcoming, or if the priests will not have it, the thought

of the Church is impoverished, much as our thought is impoverished and vitiated if, through fear or prejudice, etc., we close our minds to certain aspects of our problem. And if the thought of the Church is impoverished its impact on the world will be weakened. The Church will not err; but she may seem to your non-Catholic colleagues—perhaps to you also—to be speaking to an inadequate brief and, as they love to say, to be out of touch with modern thought. If this should happen, we ought not to blame an abstract and disembodied "church"; we should blame ourselves.

The Church, then, needs your professional knowledge; but she needs more. The law which she teaches and imposes is the Law of Christ, and it must be imposed in His way. "My yoke is sweet" He said, "and my burden light." Not that there can be release for any of us from the doctrine of the cross. But behind that austere doctrine which all Christians must accept, and in every moment of His implementation of it, there is to be discerned His sympathy and His love of us. He knew the weight of the burden He was imposing because He shared it Himself. That love of His is to beat in our hearts too, and it is to transform what might otherwise be an intolerable burden into an awful privilege. But if that love is not present or is not seen to be present, we shall incur the censure which St. Peter passed on the Jews of old, that in their harsh application of the Mosaic Law they were imposing on the faithful a burden which neither they nor their fathers had been able to bear. Here surely if anywhere the priest needs the full co-operation of the doctor. There is a well known principle of moral theology that, in certain circumstances, a *grave incommodum*, i.e. a grave difficulty or heavy burden, may excuse from the fulfilment of

an obligation. In matters that touch on matrimony, how can a celibate clergy measure the weight of the burden that is being imposed? It is of a kind that can be measured only from within, from experience, and just because of their celibacy the clergy lack this experience. You have it—in your homes, in your knowledge of your patients. There can, of course, be no watering down of the full rigour of the law when that is clearly known. But the understanding of the human situation, which you share and the priest does not, the sympathy which your experience should generate in you, must through you be brought into the heart and mind of the official Church and must be felt beating through her legislation as the love of Christ is clear for all to read on every page of the Gospel. If the Church is to express today the law of Christ as He would have her express it, she needs what only you in your experience can give.

I have tried to outline some of the duties and privileges of the Catholic professional man, and in doing so I have deliberately stressed the positive side. You should think of yourselves as full members of the Church, sharing her burdens and responsibilities, sharing her counsels and contributing to her thought. But there remains one point of supreme importance and, it may be at times, of extreme difficulty. At the end of the 1st Vatican Council a most impressive scene took place that has often been described. Before the assembly of the Council and throughout its deliberations there was a group of Bishops who had fought tooth and nail, in season and out of season, against the promulgation of the decree on papal infallibility. The time for discussion was now over.

The decision had to be made, and it went against them. They were by one they joined their adversaries and made their objections of yesterday force to the Pope. Rome had spoken; the question was closed. In these great men, as courageous as they were intelligent, the duty of obedience to the highest authority even their most cherished conviction and having fought with all their strength for what they conceived to be the better course, they now bowed to the superior wisdom of the Church.

Some such crisis may occur in the lives of any of us. We are members of the Church, yes; we have our contribution to make to her deliberations, yes. But our function is not all-embracing. It is the function of others, not of ourselves, to speak the final word, and for us there is nothing but silence and submission. The challenge can be most formidable, and we will rise to it in proportion as we are really committed members of the Church. We have to learn in all our controversies to keep a balanced mind and judgment, and to remember that the Church is greater and wiser than any of her members. There may be a call here for detachment and humility on a scale that approaches the heroic. But so it has always been. You are in the secular world, submitted to all pressures of contemporary ideals, freedom of thought, the self-sufficiency of man and the rest. But though in the world you are, by virtue of your Christian profession, not of it; and you have not only to resist its pressures lest they overwhelm you personally, but to bring to bear on contemporary society the mind of the Church which is the mind of Christ, as faithfully as you bring to the Church all that is of value in its thought.