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# A Physician Views His Apostolate

GEORGE E. COLLENTINE, JR., M.D.

I cannot remember a time when I was not going to be a doctor. One of the early recollections of my childhood takes me back to Father O'Keefe's rectory at St. Gall's when I was about eight years old. Archbishop Stritch was vesting there for Confirmation; I was to be his train bearer. He lifted me off the floor and asked, "Son, what are you going to be when you grow up?" "A doctor." "Oho! And are you going to cut up people?" "Sure," I said for it seems that surgery was always part of my dream.

Now here I stand some 37 years later, a physician viewing his apostolate. In trying to crystallize my thoughts, I have attempted to compose my view of a Catholic physician's mission and to analyze some of the influences that have molded this very personal view — not necessarily unique nor typical nor representative of my profession; certainly not very profound. It has occurred to me that it might be more meaningful if I cited a few of the influences that have been at work through these years as background for the formation of one physician's view of his apostolate.

The locus of my personal apostolate has been very much the little world of St. Mary's Hospital, where I was born and raised, externed and interned, welcomed my children and practiced my profession. There have been brief sojourns elsewhere — one on a little island half way around

the world where in 1945 I witnessed the total antithesis of everything my apostolate means to me in the degradation of humanity that is war. Since 1959 a considerable portion of my time has been spent among the unique concentration of suffering humanity that has passed through the Burn Center at St. Mary's. Film like in combat, it seems that the drama of hospital life, with its scenes of anguish and relief, courage and cowardice, exaltation and despair, recovery and death are being flashed on a screen by a projector running at triple speed.

But far more important than events and circumstances are the persons.

Many of you are familiar with the remarkable and still unfinished story of my father, the son of an Irishman, destined in the traditions of that race to be a physician, you know. I made rounds with him at St. Mary's when I was a hospital intern, watched him operate for the first time when I was a high school freshman, proudly scrubbed with him as a high school senior, walked into the operating room, dripping hands held high in the grand approved fashion, only to be sent back to the scrub room in disgrace with rather firm instructions to

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Dr. Collettine is a member of the Milwaukee Catholic Physicians' Guild. Earlier this year he was asked to participate in the meeting of the Wisconsin Conference of Catholic Hospitals and presented these thoughts.

remove my high school sweetheart's class ring from my finger; studied at home under his guidance through college and medical school and finally had the privilege of teaming with him in practice for a few short years before he "retired" to a Benedictine monastery after the death of my mother.

Of course he has been the greatest influence in my life. I shall cite only one example of his advice, because his whole life has been a sermon. "If ever a grateful patient or relative tearfully wrings your hand in gratitude for saving the life of a loved one," he said, "accept it humbly and graciously, because you will know that you couldn't have done it by yourself and you are going to be blamed for an awful lot of things you couldn't possibly help."

There was also the late Father Anthony Berens, S.J., who taught Apologetics in the College of Liberal Arts and who used to conclude a lecture like this: "Either this is Truth and the only important Truth in the world or it's the greatest hoax that was ever perpetrated!" His contribution was the utter conviction that our God-given faith is wholly compatible with an endless pursuit of rational and scientific knowledge of nature and ourselves and that without that Faith all things are meaningless.

My mother was a convert. She never missed a basketball game when we played and she was always pleased but secretly a little irreverently amused by the universal practice of both teams of little boys kneeling — as separate teams, of

course — to pray for victory before the games. She was puzzled, she said, about how God could decide which team's prayer to answer, but it was her own observation that the team with the tallest center almost always won.

Perhaps I may be forgiven for "reaching" for analogy here. To me, the "tallest center" — the captain of the team praying to God for victory in the game against disease and death, is the physician who anchors his apostolate in his first duty, beginning in service and continuing through every day of his life in practice; the duty to cultivate a full and competent knowledge and skill in the science and art of medicine. He knows that he needs the help of his teammates in consultation. He seeks his captain's help on moral and ethical problems, especially today in the scrimmage of seemingly paradoxically changing concepts still based on changeless moral principles. He knows enough of his natural remedies to know that they will never be completely adequate — that he needs God's help. He knows that if he is incompetent because of culpable inadequacy in his preparation he is guilty of injustice toward his patient and of presumption in asking the Divine Physician to bail him out.

I offer now this view of my apostolate:

*To cure the diseases that afflict men and to alleviate the physical pain and mental suffering that arise from them.*

*To keep a conviction of the nobility of my vocation and the sacredness of my trust;*

*To love all men as brothers of Christ, to be cared for as such;*

*To understand how my science and art can fit in with God's plan for men;*

*To know that when death eventually and inevitably displaces me at the bedside I have not necessarily failed but have simply had to give way to God's call.*

I know that, with God's help, it is not impossible to carry out such

an apostolate in the little world in which I move. One of His heroes, has shown us the way in our own time, in the person of Doctor Tom Dooley, the late physician to the people of Laos and the world. At his funeral the eulogist quoted from a poem by Robert Frost some words Tom Dooley loved and lived:

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep.*

*But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.*

## XI

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