Catholic Physicians Have a National Organization

Ignatius Cox

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq

Part of the Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons, and the Medicine and Health Sciences Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol17/iss4/3
Catholic Physicians Have a National Organization

Rev. Ignatius Cox, S.J.

DURING THE CONVENTION of the American Medical Association in the summer of 1949, the Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds staged a meeting of its own. This was not unusual. But this meeting, to the writer at least, had an unusual significance. "Each age is a dream which is dying or one that is coming to birth." The Federation is the realization of a dream which is neither dying nor coming to birth. But the Federation had been lacking in the dynamic vitality and development to full maturity which were in the minds of those who dreamed it into being. From the 1949 meeting the writer gathered that the full realization of the dream, after 19 years of weary waiting, is not too far distant.

It is a happy arrangement that he brought the Federation into meeting at the time of the national powwow of the American Medical Association. The Federation is itself a national organization and aims to influence American Medicine on a national scale. This influence is not sought, of course, in purely medical matters.

"There is an idea prevalent that these Guilds are medical societies, the members whereof are Catholics. Nothing is more erroneous than this. There are too many medical societies in existence now, and Catholics do not need any to be organized for them, they being welcome as members in all medical organizations. It therefore is clear that the Guilds must be something quite different from the professional societies, something that these societies cannot offer, something essentially Catholic and attuned to Catholic ideas and doctrines. To understand what this special Guild outlook means, it is necessary to come down to the fundamental facts of our existence on earth and to examine our relationship to our Maker and our responsibilities to Him as medical men. If a Guild is to be effective, it must easily fit itself into the demands laid upon us in the Catechism. In proportion as we as members place ourselves and our work in relation to God and try to carry out the fundamental commands He has imposed upon us, in like proportion will the work and the outlook of the Guilds become His work and thereby achieve its true aim as a Catholic organization.

"A Guild, then, is an organization the avowed objects of which are the fulfillment of Catholic aims and ideals as they apply to medical men. It therefore has a spiritual basis which, while supplying us with a fundamental principle of action, will give us something to strive for and which must become part and parcel of our whole lives as Catholic physicians. Primarily this is an individual matter, something that is not worth much otherwise, because we cannot serve God other than as individuals. The Guild's function is in helping to train and arm its members so they can function properly. An untrained Catholic doctor is a definite point of weakness and danger, not only to himself as a Catholic and physician, but to the Church, the laws of God (which are really the laws of nature), the proper attitude toward work in the profession, and that of resisting pagan matters, such as birth control, sterilization of the unfit, euthanasia, etc. For this to be genuine and effective it must be preceded by a knowledge of God and of His Church which many Catholic physicians have and maintain, but which some have lost sight of, much to their own unhappiness and dissatisfaction without their actually appreciating the main reason they lack in contentments. The Guild's desires should be to strengthen the weak and make happier the strong of Catholic physicians, and to accomplish this the spiritual side of the Guild cannot be too strongly or too frequently stressed. The spiritual must be the foundation of our every effort, for without it the Guilds will fail as a Catholic activity and achieve no more than a professional debating or clinical society."

The influence aimed at, is by negative and positive means to bring home to American Medicine that, in its practical application, it is subject to the higher principles of religion and morality. This truth was developed by Cardinal Newman with his usual clarity in an address on "Christianity and Medical Science." "Here we are approaching what I conceive to be the especial temptation and danger to which the medical profession is exposed: it is a certain sophism of the intellect, founded on the maxim, implied but not spoken or even recognized—'What is true is lawful.'... And so what is true in medical science might in all cases be carried out, were man a mere animal or brute without a soul; but since he is a

\[\text{THE LINACRE QUARTERLY, Vol. 1, No. 1, 4.}\]
rational responsible being, a thing may be ever so true in medicine, yet may be unlawful in fact, in consequence of the higher law of morals and religion having come to some different conclusion."

Back in the early thirties, the sex-liberals were riding high. Their propaganda was not only active; it was at times clamorous. Birth controllers were offering their panaceas for evils ranging from world wide wars to world wide economic depressions. Sterilizers were active in the advocacy of their prescription for crime and mental disease. Medicine could become a useful ally for both these schools of bad thinking for human betterment. Also, medicine would be a necessary ally for the practical realization of the schemes of the cheerful advocates of euthanasia. Medicine was being solicited to join the ranks of the reformers whose destructive philosophy was aimed at life. The Catholic Church was the only international organization which stood out as the valiant, if at times abused, champion of the human life stream in its beginning, its progress, and its ebb. The Catholic Church alone had the coordinated body of moral and religious truths capable of saving the science of medicine from an abuse of science.

The times called trumpet-tongued for a multiplication of Catholic medical guilds after the outstanding example of such a guild in Brooklyn, N. Y. It was there, in 1927, that Richard Rendich, M.D., organized a retreat movement for the Catholic physicians of Brooklyn. That retreat movement rapidly changed itself into a medical guild. According to a writer in THE LINACRE QUARTERLY "the transformation was apparently a fundamental one. In reality, it was simply carrying over into the daily life of the physician, into his professional interests and his daily attitudes and philosophy of life, the thinking... on the great retreat meditation of the kingdom of Christ." However that might be, those dreaming of an organization of Catholic physicians who might put their scientific and professional standing solidly behind the defense and advocacy of Catholic moral and religious teaching did succeed in uniting a few guilds into a national organization called The Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds. That Federation still survives. It seems to have been endowed with the proverbial nine lives. The Federation survives, but its survival is no exemplification of medical skill but of the slow triumph of a sound idea over multitudinous difficulties. The survival is not miraculous but it is marvelous. Evidence is at hand that this is not a mere survival but a survival carrying with it the hope of a future effective of very great good.

Almost simultaneously with the foundation of the Federation, THE LINACRE QUARTERLY was initiated as the official organ of the Federation under the inspiration of Anthony Bassler, M.D. Its name is symbolic of the aims of the Federation and was chosen by the erudite and lamented James J. Walsh, M.D. Thomas Linacre was the physician to Henry the Eighth. Linacre founded the Royal College of Physicians and through it regulated the practice of medicine in England. He was looked upon as one of the great scholars of his day. Having become a priest in his later life, he united in himself the ideals of classical scholarship, scientific medicine, and practical Catholicism. THE LINACRE QUARTERLY made friends immediately. A Redemptorist Father wrote in: "Pity that the run is so short, but I guess it will lengthen with time. Here is a splendid occasion for the Catholic doctors to enter the field of Catholic action... There is no greater profession, next to the priesthood, than the medical profession. There is no larger opportunity offered to any branch of men than to the medical branch." On the occasion of THE LINACRE's third birthday a friendly Passionist Father wrote: "The issues are getting thinner. Is the offspring of the Catholic Physicians' Guild suffering from undernourishment? Doctors ought to know how to fatten their own children... It is the philosophy of current medical practice which needs criticism from a sane moral viewpoint."

All this was very encouraging. But the kindly critics never knew the inner story of how hard it was to keep the Federation and THE LINACRE in the land of the living during those dark days. One could write a touching story of the truly marvelous devotion and self-sacrifice of Joseph Dillon, M.D., and his wife in contributing to the survival of both. And the work to this same end of Mrs. Dillon after the death of her husband is an untold tale of hidden devotion. But improvement set in and the days of the oxygen tent were numbered in 1944. The Federation was affiliated with the National Catholic Welfare Conference. It was the administrative board of the latter which requested Father Alphonse Schwitalla, S.J. to become Moderator of the Federation. Because of his position as Dean of the St. Louis Medical School and his intimate association with the Catholic Hospital Association, Father
Schwitalla was an ideal choice for Moderator of the Federation and also Editor of THE LINACRE QUARTERLY, for both of which he was chosen by the Federation. But multiplied and important tasks have proved too much for Father Schwitalla. His duties with regard to the Federation have been resigned and assigned to two others. Father John J. Flanagan, S.J., is the Acting Editor of THE LINACRE and Father Donald A. McGowan of the N.C.W.C. has become the Moderator. Thus the Moderator of the Federation is located in Washington, D.C. with all that means for a nation-wide viewpoint and greater resources for promoting a rapid increase of local guilds. According to reports there are many applications for the formation of new guilds. The multiplication of such guilds within the Federation means two things: first, a widespread cultivation by groups of Catholic physicians of a study of the directives of sound morality and Catholic principles in the practice of medicine; second, the development of an elite corps which will be able to propagate these directives among physicians, Catholic and non-Catholic alike.

It is little short of a calamity for Catholics to have their medical advisers alien or hostile to sound morality in medical practice. It is a tremendous blessing for Catholics when their medical advisers are intelligent Catholics who superimpose on their medical science a knowledge of the claims of religious duty and of the limitations of their own functions in the practice of medicine. There are many non-Catholic physicians who in the practice of medicine have sound moral instincts. An elite of Catholic physicians will be able to supply the rational basis for such instincts. Moreover, the guilds through their delegates, meeting each year during the convention of the American Medical Association, will be in a position to exercise a sane negative and positive influence on this powerful group of professional men. Such was a part of the original dream in the formation of the Federation, which seems about to see fulfillment. The Federation is a teen-ager, just about 19 years old. Full maturity seems at long last a promise of the immediate future.

At present there are 15 guilds, 12 of which are affiliated with the Federation. Some 2,200 Catholic physicians are members of these groups. Several other units are in formation. The Guilds now cover the country, all the way from Boston to Sacramento, and from Detroit to New Orleans.