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# A Witness for Life

Kenneth J. Berkes, M.D.

*The author describes the following as "an updated version of my personal witness", and cites his call into "a whole new area of medical practice and ministry".*

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I recall vividly the first childbirth I ever saw. I was in my second year of medical school in 1959 and our obstetrician kindly let me observe the birth of our first child, Kyle. I was overwhelmed by the miracle of birth, new life and the fruitfulness of our love. What a joy to be present at this sacred moment, to be a part of Willa's labor and delivery, and to realize in a deeper way the responsibility I had as a husband and now as a father.

I was not actively practicing my faith as a Roman Catholic at the time. My studies and subsequent surgical training left little time for God and religion. Besides, medical science seemed to have all the answers. Like so many other physicians, I saw artificial birth control as a solution to our own "fertility problem" and prescribed it for my patients. I certainly didn't have the self-control necessary to make natural family planning practical. The Church warned that the liberal use of artificial birth control would lead to promiscuity, abortion, infanticide and euthanasia. My "enlightened" fellow physicians and I agreed that these pronouncements were hysterical poppycock. Sadly, they have all come true.

As physicians, we are sworn to protect human life. Yet, in abortion we destroy the life of an unborn child. Somehow, I repressed that fact when, in 1970, I terminated the pregnancy of an unwed high school senior with a promising college career ahead of her. Another Catholic doctor, also at odds with the Church's teaching, prevailed on my human compassion. Fearful of losing his respect, I acceded to his wishes and aborted the life within her. It was a distasteful business; I vowed I'd never do another. The full horror of what I had done didn't impact my consciousness, however, until many years later.

Having made the decision not to perform any more abortions, I continued for 13 years to practice with another surgeon who did abortions whenever he was asked. I thought to myself, "I'm not doing them; what he does is his business." Even though I was not directly involved, abortion

was part of the practice we shared in our small upstate New York community.

I had returned to the Church in 1971 through a Marriage Encounter weekend which began an ongoing adult conversion for both my wife and me. We became active in renewal activities within our local parish. Beyond meeting our own needs, it was our hope that our four children would be evangelized, too. Our experience was principally at the level of fundamental faith and emotional experience; we simply didn't deal with moral issues like abortion or the Church's consistent teaching on human sexuality. But then, little was being said from the pulpit in those days about such matters.

However, in 1980, I read an excerpt from Rev. John Powell's *The Silent Holocaust*. That article stirred my conscience about the horror of abortion. I knew that I had to speak to my partner about the abortions he was doing, but I just didn't have the courage. I ignored the pleading of my conscience and remained silent.

A few years later, in our search for spiritual direction, we were led to the Anawim Community centered in Corning, New York. Within the framework of this Catholic lay community, we found not only the guidance for a deeper prayer life, but a call to live as authentic Catholic Christians by God's grace. We began to see how much the secular world and the dissenting voices within the Church had formed our consciences. This was especially true in the area of sexuality, where the contraceptive mentality of our culture had greatly influenced our personal life together and my professional life. While not doing abortions, I was prescribing contraceptives and performing surgical sterilizations. In a misguided effort to assume rightful responsibility and get my wife off "the pill", I had had a vasectomy.

### **Awareness of God's Mercy**

As I became aware of my own sin and how I'd been deceived, I saw God's mercy for me more clearly and became more compassionate toward those physicians still caught in the lie of abortion. I knew that I not only had to clean up my own life, but that I could no longer postpone confronting my partner with the truth. I realized that if he didn't give up doing abortions, I could no longer be a part of our surgical practice. That would mean major upheaval in my personal and professional life. At the time, I was only dimly aware of the far-reaching consequences of my decision.

I approached my partner in humility. I asked his forgiveness for the ways that I had failed him in our partnership and asked him to stop doing abortions. Ultimately, neither he nor the board of our local community hospital would give up the practice of aborting life. In December, 1983, I left the hospital, my partnership of 14 years and the private practice of surgery.

Somehow, I knew it wasn't just a matter of finding another town in need of a general surgeon and starting over. I had entered a moral fray and was deeply wounded by the rejection, isolation and lack of support I experienced when my decision hit the local papers. I knew that I needed time and prayer.

Pain forced me to pray; prayer brought a deeper knowledge of self and of God. The painful truth of who I really am came slowly and was accompanied by a deeper awareness of God's love for me in spite of my weakness and selfishness. I began to see this as the mechanism of deepest inner healing and the freedom to be the man God created me to be.

Throughout my search, God also met our physical and financial needs. Six months before I walked out of the hospital and my surgical practice, the youngest of our four children, Kevin, received a last minute appointment to the Air Force Academy. This meant that there would be no further tuition bills and that if we budgeted carefully, Willa and I could survive for upwards of 18 months.

Initially, I did part-time emergency room work to keep from depleting the financial cushion provided when I left the professional corporation my partners and I had formed years before. The emergency room work actually filled more of my emotional and professional needs. It provided the much needed assurance that I was still a physician and that I had other knowledge and skills beyond the technology of surgery; I could still care for people.

I was offered the job as school physician and found that even routine screening exams were a salve to my shattered professional ego. I also became the physician for our local day treatment facility for retarded citizens. As I cared for the mentally handicapped, their simplicity and trust helped me to see my own handicapped condition. I found the freedom to let go of some more of the layers of the exterior image I had maintained to protect the core of my fearful nature.

Throughout the process, my wife remained loyal, trusting that God was leading us. She knew that as painful and difficult as our journey had become, that we were heading in the right direction. Our grown children, while no longer a part of our household, were initially deeply threatened by the instability they saw in our changing lifestyle. They came to be more supportive as they began to see us put our frequently professed faith into action.

To my delight and surprise, we received over 50 letters of support from prayerful, simple people from all over our area of New York State. I struggled with the lack of support from any members of the medical community, however, and was deeply grieved that only a few priests supported us by writing or calling. I offered our bishop my full-time service without pay for a year to help stem the tide of abortion in our diocese. A few meetings and talks to youth groups was the disappointing response to my offer.

## Community Provided Support

It was our Anawim Community which provided emotional and spiritual support. I very much doubt that I would have come to such conviction in my conscience without the formation provided by the Community. To venture forth into the unknown alone is to enter a desert experience with God. Without the guidance of those who had been there before, I would have settled at the first oasis and not gone further. I have come to see that the interior life, the experience of God in prayer, is a continuing journey into uncharted territory for each soul.

Reflecting on my years of surgical practice, I saw that the last five years or so were marked by a growing dissatisfaction, a longing for fulfillment which surgery no longer afforded me. I was in the enviable position of working with two other highly qualified surgeons. Our personal and professional relationships, apart from the moral issue in question, were good. My gross income was well into the six figure bracket and I covered our practice only every third night which left ample time for spiritual and recreational endeavors.

What I thought was a mid-life crisis was rooted in selfishness I had achieved the "good life" I had always dreamed of, both materially and in terms of prestige and image in the community. Yet, the less demanding the on-call schedule became, the less I had to work, the more I resented having to work. The more free time I had, the more time for recreation I seemed to want and to need. By my middle 40s, after only a little over a decade of private practice, I had adopted a retirement mentality.

Basically, I was caught in myself. I no longer had a heart for serving others. I enjoyed the technical aspects of my profession as well as the esteem it afforded, but I resented the responsibility for other people's lives. In a way, it was much like a slow "burn-out". Prayer was beginning to bring to light what a fearful person I am. My principal defense, denial, was beginning to crumble along with my surgical bravado. There had been signs of dissatisfaction, like considering relocating to another area of the country or in some way limiting my practice. I felt torn not only by my recreational interests, but by a yearning within me to put together my growing faith in God and medical practice. Somehow, I sensed, things were fragmented rather than integrated. In some ways, I felt called to minister to my patients out of my own deepening faith, but I was intimidated by the secular surroundings in which I practiced and my own conflicting desire for time for myself. Besides, it was easier to "fix" people physically than it was to give more of myself and "care" for them. In many ways, God had prepared me for the radical move I was called to make. It almost seemed that abortion was the noble cause, the white horse, I had been looking for to carry me out of my turmoil.

After I left surgery, doubts and fears nagged at me endlessly. I was replaced at the hospital within six months. While a few friends on the nursing staff continued to lament my leaving, life at the hospital seemed to

go on pretty much as usual. My infrequent appearances there (or in any hospital, for that matter) were agonizing experiences, reminding me of what I had been and perhaps still should be. I clung to my prayer, to my Community, and to the daily reception of the Eucharist. Even there, I was frequently the only man at daily Mass with all the faithful older women. My wife's constant presence at my side, her trust in the Lord and her reliance on my prayer were a vital source of strength for me.

### **Restoring Sense of Worth**

As God continued the process of restoring my personal and professional sense of worth, I was called to stand as a "whole man" before Him. I knew that I had to surrender my sexuality to Him by restoring my God-given fertility. By surgically separating the unitive and procreative aspects of our conjugal union, mutual pleasure rather than self-sacrificing love became the distorted focus of our relationship. On the feast of the Transfiguration, Aug. 6, 1985, I had my vasectomy reversed under general anesthesia. At our stage in life, Willa and I certainly don't sense that God wants us to have more children. Yet, our desire is to honor Him, the Giver of all life, by being open to life. We were nearly 50 years old when we began practicing natural family planning. It hasn't been easy, given our self-indulgent pattern for over 25 years. But, God's grace is sufficient and our love and respect have flourished in the ensuing three years.

Five months after I left hospital practice, I received an inspiration in prayer to open our home to establish a "healing center." What I envisioned was a general medical practice, incorporating Christian counseling and healing prayer. This was to be a place for mending the soul as well as the body. My focus needed to be not so much on fixing but restoring and reconciling. Like me, others needed to be reconciled to themselves, to others and to God. I began to see that healing ultimately is eternal union with the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit, not for the present time, but for eternity. It made little sense to "fix" the body and improve or extend this life only to have those we care for suffer eternal death.

As quickly as the inspiration came, there were confirmed signs that further interior preparation was needed before such a medical ministry could be undertaken. I knew that what I had been called to had to be integral, incorporating not only my medical gifts but making a gift of my whole person to those in need. I knew that it couldn't be a fragmented experience, but a gift of all that I am in service to others. It was there that God began to deal more intensely with my fears and my selfishness. He had to break down my tendency to relate to others solely as a professional.

Finally, in March of 1985, the Anawim Healing Center opened in our farm house three and a half miles from the Village of Penn Yan. We converted a back bedroom on the main floor to an exam room, utilized our dining room as a business office and the large modernized kitchen as a reception and waiting area. We began with my wife, who had no previous

medical background, our eldest daughter, Kyle, and me. My wife served as a hostess in her own kitchen, greeting people, spending time conversing with them, and touching the deeper needs beyond the physical problem for which they had sought my attention. Kyle did the necessary bookkeeping, insurance forms and general secretarial work. Initially, we had no nursing personnel and I simply utilized my wife or daughter to assist with minor surgery, pelvic exams, etc.

From the very onset, the poor came. As they came, our hearts were opened more and more to serve and get beyond the fear of our inadequacy. My training was in surgery and here I was doing general practice! Could God supply the medical knowledge I needed or at least the wisdom to know when I was in over my head and needed to refer patients to other physicians? I soon found that He would meet my need by meeting the needs of the people we were seeking to serve, as long as I was humble enough to admit when I didn't have the answers and make a referral.

Because there is such a need for primary care in our area, especially among the poor, we soon became very busy. Some of those who came for medical care were open to counseling and to joining men's and women's Christian formation groups which we began with other Anawim Community members in our area. We began dealing more and more with broken marriages, disordered lives, divorce, sexual abuse, perversion and the tragic reality of the world around us extending far beyond physical illness. As the caseload grew, we increased our staff by adding a full time secretary and a nurse who also does counseling.

We cannot claim miracles. We have seen people's faith deepen and have witnessed a renewal in their commitment to Christ. Emotional and spiritual healings always accompany conversion. God has honored our efforts on His behalf by allowing us to be instrumental in bringing His healing grace to several of our people. For me, there is no greater joy than to see a fellow human being come to fuller life and freedom in the Lord. In the past, I had had the opportunity to do major life-saving surgery and the joy of satisfaction that it gave me cannot compare to the overwhelming joy of seeing another person come to know the healing love of Jesus Christ.

In God's magnanimity, we have been blessed to see the fruit of our labors in our own family. Kyle has committed her life to God through the Anawim Community. Kevin, left the Air Force Academy, and after prayer and search, has made a similar commitment. He has been blessed with a call to the priesthood. Our two middle children, Ken and Kari, both have a deepening faith and a developing prayer life to help guide their search for fulfilling lives of service to others.

Ultimately, I see myself as a medical missionary. My call is to utilize the medical gift God has given me to meet the needs of others and lead them to know Him. I do this with the support of family and Community and with a deep knowledge of my own selfishness and inadequacy. Yet, I see it more than ever as a work of God; a work to which He has called me in His mercy and through which I am brought to deeper healing in myself and in my

relationship with Him. It is the fulfillment of my being; it is the gift of all that I am in service to others for the upbuilding of the Church for the Kingdom of God. Like Mary, I am beginning to sing that my whole being proclaims the greatness of my God. I rejoice in His favor and boundless mercy for allowing me to stand in His presence and serve Him.

God's favor is very much with us. As of June, 1988, the Anawim Healing Center has moved into a more accessible and larger facility within the Village of Penn Yan. Here, it is our hope to continue this work of God, perhaps on an expanded scale if God blesses us with another physician and additional nurses. Thus far, He has met all of our needs. Each week is a step in faith, seeing just enough income to cover expenses and our small payroll. When we sold our home outside town we realized just enough to purchase a small house and adjacent office building. The cost of necessary renovations was covered by a bequest Willa received when her 98-year old grandmother died two years ago.

In spite of the interior struggle with selfish nature, the struggle with relationships and the demands of those we serve, we are grateful for God's call to this work. In it, I am inspired by His mercy to me, His favor in allowing me to care for His poor, and the constant hope of seeing them come closer to Him. It is by His grace that I have "chosen life, so that I and my descendants may live in the love of the Lord our God, obeying His voice, clinging to Him, for in this my life consists." (Dt. 30:20)

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