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Spirituality and the Physician

Rev. Adrian van Kaam, C.S.Sp.

Following is the summary of a talk given in March, 1983, by Rev. Adrian van Kaam of Duquesne University, at a family Communion breakfast of the Catholic Physicians' Guild of the Greater Pittsburgh area. Rev. van Kaam is director emeritus of the Institute of Formative Spirituality.

A Faith Healing and a Wise Balance of Appreciation of Grace and Nature

Today we witness in many quarters a growing interest in spiritual life. Catholic doctors rejoice with their Church in reawakening to the life of the spirit. They share as well with the Church its centuries-old concern for any extremism that may cloud the best intentions of well-meant spiritual movements. Doctors may encounter such excesses in their daily practice.

One of the finest fruits of the deepening of faith in Christianity has been the conviction that prayerful belief in God's healing plays a powerful role in the cure of human ailments. The spiritual life of Catholic physicians also leads them to believe firmly in the healing power of the Lord. Often they may have had to face cures and reversals of illness which could not be explained by the medicine they know-how presently available to them. They often felt that their own faith as well as the faith of their patients and families could have evoked the healing power of our Lord.

Catholic physicians who lead a spiritual life also believe that their medical expertise is only theirs ultimately as a gift of God. This gift becomes effective because of His blessing of their dedication and efforts in the service of His faith in His healing of the ailments God allows in one's life, nor can their generosity ever go deep enough.

Recently, however, we may have been disturbed not only by an excess in faith or in prayer, but by an excess of what we may do for us without any cooperation on our part with the healing power of God. Media reports focus, for example, on deaths or the lasting debility of adults or children who could have been saved by medical care. In these cases, care was refused by well-meaning Christians for themselves or their children. They believed that their form of Christianity forbade them to put any trust in medicine since they had to place their trust in God alone.

We should not doubt or judge the faith of these believers. Yet we should know that our Catholic tradition does not recommend that the faithful spiritualize their lives so as to avoid the services and the expertise

of the physician when struck by illness. One of the great gifts of St. Thomas Aquinas to Catholic teaching is his doctrine of grace and nature.

St. Thomas helps us to maintain in our spiritual life a fine balance between faith in God's gracious healing and the wise, prayerful use of medical skill and expertise. God may perform miracles, but usually the grace of healing obtained by prayer follows the natural way. We should not tempt God by the foolish expectation that faith in His healing power can make medical attention forever superfluous.

Most often, if God wants to answer our prayers, He cooperates almost unnoticeably with natural means. We believe that He guides the healing hand and dedicated mind of the physician, especially when we ask Him to do so by our prayers as physicians, patients, friends and families. With St. Thomas and the Church, Catholic physicians ought to believe that grace and nature in medicine do not exclude each other but work together.

Dedicated Physicians and Their Families

Spirituality in medical life means that physicians should not be so absorbed in the impressive and important techniques, drugs, and diagnostic tools of medicine that they are no longer present to their patients in a distinctively human way. Physicians are not only well-functioning medical minds and skillful hands; they are also endowed with a human spirit. Their spirit is what makes them distinct from all nonhuman life.

Spirit is that aspect of our life which cannot be computerized. According to St. Thomas, already the natural human spirit elevates each human being far above nonhuman life. We may call the distinctive humanness of physicians in their presence to patients a natural spirituality.

Our Church teaches us that the natural human spirit, our human spirituality, has been affected by original sin. Since the Fall, we can only be steadfastly and fully faithful to the demands of our human spirit by the power of grace, and grace touches the whole of our lives.

To be a physician is a special grace of God. The family of the physician shares in that gracious call. God calls family members to participate in some way in the dedication of the husband or wife, father or mother, who is called to relieve the physical suffering of countless people as a medical doctor. The father or mother who is a physician puts in long working days, is often called away for emergencies and is sorely missed at home when a spouse or children would like so much to be with them.

The families of physicians should often pray for the grace and patience to bear with these absences. They should try to grow in tolerance out of love for our healing Lord, Who calls His physicians to cooperate with His saving power at any time of day or night.

Jesus of Nazareth and the Spirituality of the Physician

Physicians must live their spiritual life in the midst of a demanding world. The monastic life offers an excellent example of the great prayer, which should also mark the physician's life. It is the reminder in the Church that presence to God should be first and foremost in a Christian's life. However, the everyday style of spirituality of professional lay people is less clearly exemplified in the rhythm of the peaceful monastic life lived away from professional duties in an office, hospital or laboratory. The best example for the physician is our Lord Himself.

Jesus spent the greatest part of His life as a professional laborer in Nazareth. He lived like the other people in His town, so much so that they were taken by surprise when He began to preach. People wondered how this could be the son of Joseph, the carpenter, whom they all knew.

We believe, of course, that Jesus is the high priest of the New Testament. Yet in Nazareth He chose to appear simply as a laborer, not as a Jewish priest or scribe. People knew Him only as a person on whose shoulders the Blessed Virgin quietly supported the profession of Joseph. The families of physicians should support their dedication to the material needs of their patients, who are suffering, with love and understanding.

The life of Jesus is truly a great inspiration for physicians, who want to live a spiritual life in the context of their daily professional dedication.

Characteristics of the Spiritual Life of the Physician

Such a spiritual life should be marked first of all by the basic characteristics of any devoted Catholic life: participation in the sacramental life of the Church; familiarity with the Scriptures and fidelity to the teaching of the Church; growth in the theological and moral virtues and in the life of prayer and meditation, spiritual reading and reflection.

Over and above this necessary basis, we could mention some special virtues that should be the fruit of the graced spiritual life of the physician. They, too, should be lived somehow by all people who strive after a spiritual life. However, they obtain a special slant in the life of the physician. These special virtues are a well-integrated, graced medical competence, congeniality, compatibility and compassion.

Competence

The spiritual life of Catholic physicians should inspire them to maintain and deepen their medical competence. As faithful collaborators of the Divine Physician, they should put at His disposal the best

medical competence they can muster so that He can use it to heal their patients. Should they be beyond help, the physician should ask God to grant them the courage to bear with their ailments in surrender to His allowing and loving will. The physician's competence is, therefore, a graced competence.

Physicians should be convinced that their talents are a gift of God. They should pray often that His grace may elevate their competence to a height they could never obtain by themselves. Their extensive studies in college and graduate school may have led physicians to a certain disintegration of the holistic insight in the meaning of life and world presented by the Catholic tradition. The perspectives of many sciences may pull medical students in directions which are different from and incompatible with the teaching of the Church due to some underlying and mistaken views of life and its divine dignity. In this sense the present day uni-versity could be called a di-versity.

The spiritual life inspires physicians to correct, complement and integrate all of these views in the light of the teachings of the Church and its magisterium.

To foster integrative competence, physicians should take advantage of the opportunities offered by the Church to its professionals to gain spiritual integration. It is clear that church services directed to the average faithful cannot deal adequately with the details of such integration.

Congeniality

Some physicians may be afraid that living a spiritual life would make them lose touch with their colleagues, staff members and patients. The opposite is true. To live a spiritual life is to allow grace to bring out in our lives the image and likeness of God in which we are created. That image or form has a unique modulation in each of us in accordance with our biogenetical predispositions and our special calling by Divine Providence.

Here we can learn again from St. Thomas that grace does not destroy our nature but corrects and perfects it. We note here the differences in the graced personalities of Teresa of Avila and Therese of Lisieux; John of the Cross and John Bosco; Philip Neri and Anthony of Egypt. All of them tried to live a life for God which was congenial with the initial direction He bestowed on them mysteriously from the beginning.

Similarly, physicians who live a sound spiritual life try to be faithful to the unique personality which God called them to develop. While all are equally concerned about the well-being of their patients, their style of approach and their bedside manner are not identical, nor is their interaction with colleagues and staff members.

Compatibility

This graced fidelity to their uniqueness is balanced by the virtue of compatibility. This means that physicians wisely and charitably consider the moods, feelings and needs of their patients, their supportive and nursing staff, and their fellow doctors. Grace enables them to sacrifice momentarily what feels congenial to them in regard to their self-expression if they sense that it would unnecessarily hurt the feelings of their patients or others.

No matter how they are inclined to feel personally, Catholics are always ready to make their medical practice and life compatible with the spirit of the Church as expressed by the Catechism. A congeniality that is at odds with Church teaching and the image of God in us cannot contradict the Church.

Compatibility with colleagues and their families prevents physicians, under the guise of a spiritual life, from adopting strange and excessively pious ways of action and expression which would alienate them unnecessarily from their colleagues or patients. The spiritual life is not meant to set them apart from others. It is meant to unite them with their colleagues in all things which are decent and in no way against the will of God and the teaching of the Church.

Compassion

Catholic spiritual life makes physicians deeply aware of their own vulnerability and that of their patients. The Holy Spirit shares in God's own compassion for themselves and others. Because of this vulnerability, physicians, like all other professionals, do make mistakes at times. Errors of judgment are unavoidable in the complicated art of diagnosing and healing the sick. Often, no precautions are involved at all. In spite of physicians' best attempts, things may go wrong.

Some doctors may be inclined to torture themselves with excessive guilt feelings about losing a patient or having made a diagnostic mistake. The spiritual life should help them abide serenely in the compassion of the Lord which surrounds and pervades them from all the time. The more they live in this spiritual abandonment and find relief in His compassion, the more compassionate they will become with others. They begin to manifest to their patients the compassion of Jesus Himself.

At present the Church is blessed with a great concern for the poor and the underprivileged in this world. Physicians and their families should share generously in that loving attention of Christians for those who suffer oppression, but they should guard against the emergence of excessive and false guilt feelings in this matter.

Physicians and their families often live under great stress. Like

other people, they need recreation and relief which are especially meaningful in their kind of life. Farmers need another kind of recreation than physicians; ballerinas may seek types of relaxation different from those sought by the average bartender.

Spiritual life does not mean that physicians, because of the poverty of this world, should feel guilty about playing golf, attending a concert, enjoying a well-deserved vacation, a good meal, a pleasant home.

Only the Lord knows how badly they need these things to restore their spiritual, psychological and physical energy in order to be better and more alert doctors to their patients, and to be more attentive to the Holy Spirit speaking in their lives and professions.

Doctors are especially called to extend the concern of their church to those who are poor and underprivileged in health, no matter the presence or absence of talents and possessions. People of poor health can be served far better by doctors who humbly take care of their own recreational needs and those of their families. This reasonable self-care is a graced fruit of the virtue of compassion for one's own limitations and the fragile beauty of others.

Children of Physicians

Children whose father or mother are physicians may sometimes resent or regret their absence due to their service of their patients or their laboratory research. The feeling of a certain loss of their parents' presence is understandable. Gradually, children should learn to appreciate two of the many great gifts physicians give to them.

First of all, physicians who live a spiritual life are, for their children, an example of dedication. Children should appreciate that their parent-physicians are usually not absent for their own pleasure, but rather for the benefit of people who suffer and who are entrusted to their care. This growing insight may foster the virtue of dedication in their own life.

Secondly, physicians who live a spiritual life are truly disciplined. To gain this level of competence, they need to go through a discipline of study and practice which is unparalleled in many professions. To maintain their competence and dedication, discipline is needed day by day by physicians whose great mortification in their professional life is their unnoticed, everyday, relentless ascetism.

Children should appreciate the discipline which this life call imposes on their parents, and benefit from its example. When they grow in age and spiritual wisdom, the grace of God may make them realize that the Lord has chosen them as children of physicians to share a little in the beautiful calling of a father or mother to heal people. This may help them to bear with the inconvenience of any absence.

In closing, let us ask the Lord to grant all physicians and their families the peace and wisdom of a truly spiritual life.