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Medical Knowledge: Power or Virtue ?

Rev. William F. Maestri

Father Maestri delivered this address in January, 1981 to the graduates of the Charity Hospital School of Radiologic Technology.

Among the many thoughts and feelings which are present as we celebrate this commencement are feelings of gratitude and hope.

All of you have learned a great lesson: life is interconnected and you need others in order to grow. As we celebrate your accomplishments the contributions of many come to mind: parents, spouses, friends, teachers, professional colleagues, and *patients*. Yes, patients. You owe a debt to the countless children, men and women who have entrusted themselves to your care. In giving your time, talent, and energy you have also received, and we acknowledge the depth of that gift.

Your commencement is cause for hope. All of us look to you with great expectations that, now and for all your tomorrows, you will use your knowledge for the service of others. By your devotion to the highest ideals of the medical profession, you will care for the sick and defend the sacredness of every human life. In an age in which everything has its price, your contributions are not for sale. The care you extend to your patients transcends the symbol of dollars and speaks of that which endures: the human ability to care for another person.

This commencement is a call and challenge to each of you to be men and women of high moral character. Your training has placed a great deal of technical power in your hands. The real issue is of an ethical sort: how will you *use* your knowledge in the years ahead? Will knowledge become only power in which to control and, will it and technique become ends in themselves? Or will your knowledge invite you to grow in *virtue*? The medical profession and society as a whole need men and women who view their knowledge as a sacred trust which is given to a few so it can be used for the service of many. To the extent you use your knowledge that way, you will transcend knowledge and pass into wisdom.

It should be noted that your training has taken place in one of the great teaching hospitals in the country — Charity Hospital in New

Orleans. Charity Hospital is located in the middle of the city. For our Greek ancestors, the city was the place where one went to grow in human virtue and realize one's best self. Today, however, the city is often a symbol of our neglect, indifference, violence, and our lack of concern for the poor. Charity Hospital serves the needs of the poor, the marginals, and those who often count for little in our achievement, success, and consumption-oriented society. In the midst of the city, Charity Hospital is a living testimony that care, service, and healing can still be found. Each of you has contributed in large measure to this testimony of care.

In conclusion, it may seem strange that a priest would speak in such a context — a graduation of medical professionals. Yet, until recent times religion and medicine shared a common concern: the healing of the sick. Both witch doctor and medicine man appealed to the divine for intervention on behalf of the afflicted. Over time, medicine and religion separated into science and ethics. Unfortunately, medicine as science was viewed as "value-free" and beyond ethical analysis. However, recent developments such as genetic engineering, the Karen Ann Quinlan case, human transplants, and the issue of social justice as to allocation of resources and selection for those who will receive these resources are anything but "value-free." More and more thoughtful opinion, both within and outside of the medical community, is being expressed about the need to seek reconciliation between medicine and ethical analysis. Such a reunion, by men and women of conscience open to grace and the Spirit, will do much to increase the quality of care and the depth of healing.

My sincere hope and prayer is that each of you will join in such an effort. Working together, united in the Holy Spirit, we shall not fail!

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