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Balancing Two Vocations: Marriage and Medicine in a Culture of Life

by

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The authors are founding members of the Alleluia Community, a 32-year-old lay Christian community in Augusta, GA. Dr. Murrell is a practicing psychiatrist and Mrs. Murrell teaches fourth grade.

The following is a talk given at the 2004 annual meeting of the Catholic Medical Association.

Part I: Dr. Murrell

We live in a culture in which many seeds have been sown. We can picture a vast field in which many things are growing. The Lord has sown wonderful seeds that bring life. He has sown His own words of faith, hope and love; of truth and freedom; of the power of the Holy Spirit; words of life growing a culture of life. But the enemy has also sown his words of pride, sensuality and vanity; of ignorance and false freedom; words of death growing a culture of death. And they are growing up side by side.

“He put another parable to them: ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. While everybody was asleep his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and made off. When the new wheat sprouted and ripened, then the weeds appeared as well. The owner’s laborers went to him and said: ‘Sir, was it not good seed that you sowed in your field? If so, where do the weeds come from?’ He said to them: ‘Some enemy has done this.’”

Our talk might be better titled, “Balancing Two Vocations: Building a Culture of Life in a Marriage and Medicine in a Culture of Death.” If we are responsible for growing a culture of life we need to understand what that means and be able to look at our own lives honestly in this regard.

Following are areas where our mindset moves us towards either a culture of life or a culture of death.

As a physician I am at the top of the authority chain in my profession. I can usually set the atmosphere in my workplace. At work, I am the expert, the captain of the team. My staff looks up to me and I call the shots. This is very affirming and I may be tempted to choose to spend more time at work, where I am so competent, than at home in my marriage where I may sometimes, or often, feel less competent. I get strokes at work but I may get criticism at home. I can delegate duties at work but at home I am often responsible for doing the "scut work." If I prefer to be at work, how is that going to affect things at home? I need to be aware of potential scenarios and figure out how to spend adequate time at home. I cannot be afraid of the homework it takes to be a good spouse and parent, a servant of my family, if I want to build a culture of life at work and at home.

As a physician, I am considered an expert. People come to me for answers. Who do I go to? I go to consultants for specific questions regarding my clinical practice. But what about my personal life, my marriage, my family? Is there a place of personal accountability and good counsel for me with my personal problems and questions? Do I go to my wife, my friend, a priest? Or will I decide to just figure it out myself? I have to find a way to make myself accountable to someone, someone I can trust, someone who will come to know me and be able to give me wise and good counsel. Where I look for help will have significant influence on how I see things; in other words, how I will build the culture around me.

In a world in which autonomy and independence seem to be such high values, accountability to others for my choices does not seem to hold a very high place. Yet, the Old Testament book of Proverbs recommends accountability as it places great value on having a number of wise counselors. We are taught to value accountability by practices such as the examination of conscience where we take account of our choices before God and, often, His priest. In the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, as well as many other places in scripture and Catholic teaching, we are confronted by the reality that we will be held accountable for our choices in life.

I am accountable to my wife, Karen, for living a life of love (cf Ephesians 5 and 1 Corinthians 13), truth and holiness. Our spouse can be a great instrument of God for our holiness as so many of our actions and choices are displayed before them. They are here to help us live a life of holiness, of wholeness.

We have some choices in other relationships as to how accountable we want to be. The laws of the land and the regulations of our professional associations hold us accountable in some ways. We can do more if we choose. We can develop friendships with others who share our values. For example, Karen and I have chosen to associate with and become friends with members of the Catholic Medical Association. We count each other as brothers and sisters in the faith and allow ourselves a degree of

accountability to the truth we receive here and to correction if we are in error. My relationships here are a source of strength and fidelity for me and I understand my accountability to the truth that you speak and example for me by your lives.

Knowing my personal need for accountability, for holy friendships, for those whose lives challenge me to greater fidelity to the truth and to the Lord Who is Truth, God also gave me a lay Christian community in which to live my life. It is a committed life, structured by a Rule, and supported by lifelong friendships. We use terms like "friend of conscience" to define our relationships. And, I must mention the great gift of the Church in all areas of accountability as Teacher and Mother.

Knowing the truth and what is good is essential. Living it out is true friendship with God. Accountability is a gift that aids our humility and our openness to be changed by the truth.

As a physician, I often come home tired, carrying the ills of the world on my shoulders. I want my home to be a refuge, a shelter, a haven of peace. I may feel entitled to be cared for because of my work. But, at home, I must start another workday, the work of caring for my wife, children, and home.

I have had an image in my head for many years. It comes from the Scripture where Jesus is describing humble service. "Which of you, with a servant plowing or minding sheep would say to him when he returned from the fields, 'Come and have your meal at once?' Would he not be more likely to say, 'Get my supper ready; fasten your belt and wait on me while I eat and drink? You yourself can eat and drink afterwards.' Must he be grateful to the servant for doing what he was told? So with you: when you have done all you have been told to do, say, 'We are useless servants; we have done no more than our duty'." (Luke 17:7-10) The image I have is that when I come home from work, I take off my white coat and put on a white apron; my job is not done yet.

As a physician who has to deal with the practical realities of a real world of suffering and death, and because I am a scientist, I may believe that I am more competent to make medical ethical decisions than anyone else – even the Church. I may be tempted by leaders in my profession, or even coerced, to make judgments that are opposed to the teaching of the Church. This may include ethical decisions I have to make in my own family. *Humanae Vitae* and natural family planning are examples I will touch on a little later. I have found that wisdom often follows obedience. A decision to obey, followed by prayer and study, has often brought me to the right place in medical moral issues.

We all have events in our lives that have contributed to developing central organizing principles, an ethos, for us; to developing a particular soil that allowed, or did not allow, God's life-giving word to us to take root and grow. This is one of mine.

Karen and I were married in 1967. *Humanae Vitae* was not out yet and we were encouraged by our priest to use our own conscience regarding birth control, given an overall openness to life and the avoidance of abortion or sterilization. Marrying young, Karen in school, me in Vietnam, Karen's Protestant background, and lack of clear Catholic teaching... all of this led us to choose to use birth control pills as thoughtfully as we could. In 1968 *Humanae Vitae* came out and we read it. It was difficult to understand and we did not get a lot of encouragement to conform to it. But, in prayer, the Lord spoke to my heart about authority. I knew how to exercise authority from being in the military. The Lord spoke to me about living under rightful authority, about obeying rightful authority. The Church was the rightful authority regarding this issue so I decided to live under her authority. I talked to Karen about it and she agreed.

After deciding to obey, our thinking changed and our relationship changed. I became less selfish; I did not take as much for granted; I learned to respect Karen more and to communicate better. Our relationship expanded; I understood better my responsibility for new life, for stewardship of God's gifts. Natural family planning helped teach me to be constantly recollected. It helped teach me temperance; it dealt with my sensuality and vanity. It helped build my character and provided a better soil in which to grow virtue and a culture of life.

As a physician I may have trouble integrating my life with my faith. But I cannot, should not, separate my faith from my life, from my marriage or from my profession. I may have temptations to look to the experts in my profession in how to conduct my professional life. This may lead me to build a life that is separated, to various degrees, from my faith. We are talking about forming a culture of life and an ethical system based on the principles of that culture.

Culture is a word derived from the root word "colo" which means cultivating the soil. Culture, in a way, is the soil in which life grows and in which worldview and faith grow. Ethos, from which we derive our word "ethics", is generally defined as a system of belief around which life – belief and behavior – is built through particular choices we make in the here and now.

Elements that comprise an ethical system or that nourish the soil of a particular culture determine the nature of that ethical system and culture. What competes for the "organizing center" of the physician's life? Is it money, security, material happiness, professional fame or honors, or reputation? Or is it family, my relationship with God, respect for the Church, and service to others? What will my organizing principles be?

It might be worth mentioning at this time that Jesus said that we could not serve two masters, God and mammon. Even from a practical

viewpoint, it is really not possible to live in two worlds: we will wind up hating one or the other or may just become ineffective in both.

What kind of soil will I plant myself in? The Scriptures speak of soil (culture?) into which God sows His word of life. There is a hard path where the soil is packed down so hard, so tight, so compressed by all the traffic on it (busyness, distractions, many voices, many ideologies, propaganda, personal hurts/wounds, addictions/bondages) that the word of truth, the word of life, does not even penetrate the surface. It lies on the surface and is eaten by the birds (a pretty graphic description).

In all of the other situations the word enters the soil; it is received. But, in one case, the so-called shallow soil, the word never gets very deep, never grows roots, and is not able to be nourished adequately. There is no examination of the word, no reflection; the shallowness here, in thought and faith, provides no nourishment so the word does not grow. Lack of reflection; little spiritual content to one's life; and little self-knowledge makes for shallow soil.

In another case the word take roots and grows, but many other things grow up with it. Other seeds take root; competing ideas, hurts, anxieties, fears, temptations, cares, pride, sensuality and vanity; ideas and habits of a different nature that make it difficult for God's word to grow. There is not enough room provided and the other seeds may even be openly antagonistic to the Godly seed. God's work may barely hold its own or may be silenced, neutralized or unseen because of the competing weeds, thorns, ideas and feelings.

Finally, there is a good soil that nourishes the word and encourages its growth. This is the "colo", the culture of life. It is nourished by truth and love and is tended by hope.

It has to be clear that personal holiness is a key to a Godly marriage and profession. I want to be holy. I want to be wise and heroic. I want to love my wife, my family, and my patients with a Christ-like love. I find that this is a constant work. I also realize that it is not possible without grace.

My Irish Catholic upbringing did a lot in building my faith. My parents were prayerful and faithful Catholics. Their fidelity to faith and marriage created a culture of life for me to grow up in.

I was confirmed by a Chinese bishop in Taiwan when I was nine years old. Something happened. I found that I had a hunger for prayer and for being at Mass. In my daily prayer I came to know God as Father and, throughout my youth, I lived in the assurance of His care and presence.

When I was 23 years old I had another experience that was life-changing. Karen and I became involved in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal in early 1971. During my first prayer meeting I went to the chapel and sat before the Blessed Sacrament. I believe the Father spoke to my heart and

brought to mind countless times when He was with me growing up, times when I knew He was with me, protecting me, guiding me, consoling me. He told me that I needed to learn His word, the Scriptures. A second thought was more like an understanding: He wanted me to serve Him and He would lead me in that service. I needed not to be afraid, but to trust Him. It was during this time that, through the Holy Spirit, I came to know Jesus more intimately.

Retreats have also been a vehicle for growth in holiness for me. In the past 15 years I have found great graces for conversion in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. The exercises have given me a method/structure/way to live a reflective life in the Lord's presence. I found my first eight day retreat to be crucial, but now I can structure what I could call "mini-retreats" using the Spiritual Exercises, or using tapes from retreat talks or other suitable materials, particularly the Gospels, or even watching films or parts of films like "The Passion of the Christ." These retreats, which may be one hour to eight days, have the same effect: more knowledge of myself, more knowledge of Christ, and more resolve to imitate Christ. If I want to be holy, and it is very difficult to build a culture of life without holiness, how can I do so if I do not know my unknown faults, my hidden sins, my hurts and wounds, my buried promises made in anger or fear, my unexamined biases and blind spots? Without knowing myself how can I be truly free to love and serve God more fully and love my neighbor as myself? I think that retreats that lead to deep reflection and conversion are critical for us committed to building a culture of life in our marriages and professions.

I wake up each morning petitioning the Lord for grace and protection for me, my family, my faith communities, my country, my work, my patients. Karen and I make morning Mass as often as we can. In the Veterans' Hospital where I work now, the Blessed Sacrament is reserved in a small room on the 3rd floor, providing me with an opportunity to spend time with the Lord in this way every day. Praying the Rosary daily is another way I stay collected.

I believe my work at holiness depends on my use of all these graces. All is grace, including the grace to understand and make use of what God has provided for us to grow in holiness. Our intellect, our memory, our imagination, our will, our senses, our relationships, the Church and all her history and tradition, the Scriptures, our work/profession and our marriage – all are sources of grace for us.

I do not know how I could even think about forming a culture of life if my marriage was not such a culture. If I cannot care for Karen rightly, what I do in my professional life and the world around me will be affected in some significant way.

Karen and I have a good marriage (37 years). But, we have disagreements and can hurt each other. I especially disliked – no, I hated –

getting “blind-sided.” We might be getting ready to go to a community meeting, for example. Karen might make a remark about a problem she experienced at the last meeting. I might get offended by the remark since I am one of the leaders of the community. So, I might make a remark myself about Karen and how she might need to be more positive. She may say that someone has to say something. Both of us would feel hurt and possibly angry. Sometimes, memories of similar episodes or of episodes that evoked similar hurt feelings would come to our minds, magnifying the current event. These memories usually helped us feel justified in thinking that the other was wrong and that they were to blame for the current hurt. We have learned to talk through these difficulties (real dialogue is critical), and to forgive, but we really were tired of getting into them in the first place. They were never really about any issue of consequence – nothing we wanted to go to war over.

I decided that I needed to pray about this problem. During my prayer, somewhere along the way, I thought the Lord gave me the idea that part of the problem was that I really did not love Karen. I protested! Of course I loved her. I was committed to her; I wanted good for her; I had strong feeling for her; I provided for her material needs... Then, the Lord brought a Scripture to my mind: 1 Corinthians 13. I read it and was convicted by the Lord that I did not meet these criteria that His word said defined “love.” By these criteria, I was not loving Karen.

So, I took that scripture and put Karen’s name in it and typed it out and put it in a scheduling book I always had with me. I read that scripture many times each day for months, trying to get that understanding of love in my head and to live it out with Karen. I would like to read it for you now.

Be patient with Karen.
Be kind to Karen.
Do not be jealous of Karen.
Do not be boastful around Karen.
Do not be arrogant towards Karen.
Do not be rude with Karen.
Do not insist on your own way with Karen.
Do not get irritable with Karen.
Do not be resentful of Karen.
Do not rejoice at wrong in Karen.
Rejoice at what is right in Karen.
Bear all Karen presents to you.
Believe in Karen’s right heart.
Hope for the best in Karen.
Endure all for Karen.

It was very helpful to our relationship. If I love her rightly, life goes better – our relationship is more alive. Not loving her rightly would probably lead to the death of our relationship in one way or another.

To say that building a culture of life in my marriage is crucial would be an understatement. I have to work at it. It takes lots of work, dialogue, respect and mutual love. I need to see where my pride, sensuality and vanity play a role in my marriage and change where necessary. I need to value Karen as the gift she is to me from God – the one in my life He has given me to make me whole – to make me more human, as the teaching of the Holy Father in his theology of the body makes clear.

The title of our talk is “Balancing Two Vocations: Building a Culture of Life in Marriage and Medicine in a Culture of Death.” As you can see, it is through a holy marriage and professional life that a culture of life is built. Faith and love inform and form our marriages and our professional lives. How well they do this determines the fullness of the culture of life we build.

Part II: Mrs. Murrell

Today we are three years into a war on terror. But, in this last century, we have engaged in a somewhat similar war against the terror of what the Holy Father calls “the culture of death.” We here are all committed, even enthusiastically, to the “culture of life.” But it is a fight!

Although our topic is marriage, I, as a woman, live in the whole picture of family. I am widening my part of the talk to include family.

I want to cite here an article from the *National Catholic Register*, September, 2000, by Professor Salvatore Mancuso, head of the Institute of Gynecology at the Catholic University of Rome.

We have proofs that beginning in the 5th week of gestation, in other words, when a woman realizes that she is pregnant, that an infinite number of messages pass from the embryo to the mother through chemical substances like hormones and neurotransmitters. Such information serves to adapt the mother’s organism to the presence of a new being. Moreover, it has also been discovered that the embryo sends stem cells that, thanks to the mother’s immune system tolerance, colonize the maternal medulla and adhere to it. What is more, lymphocytes are born from here and remain with the woman for the rest of her life. It is somewhat as though the “thoughts” of the child pass to the mother even many years after his birth. Also, a very close tie is undoubtedly created between the man and woman because the child has 50% of the father’s genetic characteristics.

So, Kevin, when you talk to me you are also talking to our five children and, believe it or not, to yourself. Yes, I physiologically have instincts! Talk about theology of the body!

Keying off our Holy Father, I want to share our battle between our little family micro-culture of life, fighting from within and from without the culture of death. It is a classic battle, waged against our own flesh (and that is hard for me since I have six other people's stem cells as part of my flesh), the world and even the devil. Catholic pro-life doctor-families, by vocation, are on the front lines. Here are four weapons of warfare we can employ for the fight. They are:

1. An emphasis on family time.
2. Communication.
3. Planning
4. Mission

I am just going to share some little epiphanies, principles the Lord gave; doors He provided for us to choose to walk through.

There was the dilemma of whether to get married before or after Kevin went to Vietnam. We chose marriage before. We were then given a chance to be together during that year in Hawaii and also at a perfectly scheduled time for me in Japan, as I was finishing school. There we learned that spending our little savings on being together was well worth the price. That's a principle that carries us through til today. We treasure those special times spent together. Just recently, twelve of us tubed down the Chattahoochee River in North Georgia. It was a blast, even for the five-month-old. The importance of nuclear family trips and outings have given us a real cultural foundation.

I think of the two hours (turned seven hours), rock-scaling hike in the North Carolina mountains where our youngest, John, at three years old, wore his cowboy boots and made it the whole way and our little two liter miracle water jug that never ran out of water the whole hike! There were games of "sardines" in the house, family game nights, trips to visit relatives across the country, lots of "out-doorsy" experiences as well as trips to big cities. Yet, at times, getting ready for any of these events seemed like fighting through hell to get there. The appliances or cars that broke down right before the trip; sickness or car troubles on the way... Despite all of these kinds of problems, the result was perseverance through suffering, some great memories and stories and, finally, a taste of heaven.

I remember all of us, plus two grandparents, after much anticipation, at the gates of Disney's Magic Kingdom, only to have to wait a whole half-hour to go in because the ten-year-old was so excited that he got a really bad bloody nose. But after the wait, it was indeed "magic."

Mealtime together takes sacrifice. I remember one child deciding to quit the gymnastics team at age 11 because she missed those family mealtimes together so much. We tried to wait for Dad as much as possible, sometimes serving children's healthy hors d'oeuvres or larger school snacks to tide us over. Then we have the whole area of holiday meals and tons of holiday traditions that really define what our family culture is.

Sure, we could probably afford a nicer house or car, but the principle of quality experiences spent together as a family have far outweighed those things. Being together brings more life.

A second area is communication. Somewhere between Kevin's undergrad and residency, the Lord made it abundantly clear that we needed to talk. Verbal intercourse before sexual intercourse became my motto. We talk about everything – all my needs and desires, and all his. I mean every kind of physical and emotional desire. In the Holy Father's theology of the body, marriage is to be an icon of God's total self-giving love to the Church and we are to be united in a mutual climax of our love. Well, I cannot be part of that deep profound union if I am not totally communicating. I cannot help Kevin be more human or holy (or he me, for that matter) if we are not totally communicating. Prior to that, I need to be sure that I am in deep union with my God. And what life that all brings! Dates and couple getaways provide continual couple communication.

Arguments! Arguments on the way to Mass! It took us a few years to realize that we could agree not to argue on the way to Mass. What a revelation of peace! We could write out the check for the collection the night before without having to get into a budget debate before Mass! Working through the communication – all the way through – is essential for us. I might have to sit on a problem or issue until Kevin has recovered from the call or the day, but to work it – to talk it all the way through – is vital. That means fair fighting, 100%-100% listening, and practically no defensiveness. What life verbal intercourse brings! Communication holds true for each member of the family. Talking things all the way through with respect for each individual involved is a key to real truth, intimacy and life. Forming agreements, sometimes written, based on those commitments, also helps.

A third area is planning. My compassionate husband, who goes the extra mile and stays late at work to make sure his patients are properly bedded down, so to speak; my romantic husband, who wrote poetry and planned beautiful dates, was now not able to plan nights out with me or even think about the difficulty of finding a sitter. I had to revamp my expectations about dates, presents and even romance to match his. He needed me to suggest ideas for these things. I did, with gusto! He is usually happy to match his expectations to mine. It just took both of us altering our pride and adjusting our vanity.

We are also a pastoral team for our family, besides a couple, and found weekly planning meetings invaluable. They circumvent many mismatched schedule expectations. Now, with our family being older, planning gatherings far enough ahead to save the day brings peace. Assuming does not bring peace.

My last area is mission. First, our mission to our own little children. I think of the many rosaries where the baby just rolled around the floor with his wooden beads. There were morning prayers, 7 a.m. Masses, adorations, and more. Our community provides a whole support structure for these family devotions. Kevin's and my particular call to mission is Christian community.

When we were first married, we envisioned forming our own little culture. Then, when the Lord actually opened the door for us to form community, which would be under the Catholic umbrella, we were thrilled. The Alleluia Community has a true alternative culture of life for our family, providing school, missions, a real community of prayer, support, personal ministry, collegiality, opportunity for sacrifice, correction and dying to self. It is a day to day mission for us. We have learned a lot about service in community. Service is another aspect of mission. Babysitting, meal preparation, and general help to others keep our family "looking outwards." Of course, it can be more fun to clean someone else's house than our own, but teaching discipline, delayed gratification, work before play, and service before reward is a good way to go.

And then there is the actual mission to others; the "hands-on Gospel." How many bible schools to impoverished neighborhoods, migrants and parts of the world have brought adventure to our life! But the effect on our own family and marriage is that life comes back to us. Mission has also shown us clearly the gap between light and darkness. I think of the time when we had a pumpkin thrown through our car windshield two days before we were leaving for India and a back window shot out during a mission to Poland and Romania (and we live in a safe neighborhood!) I think of the passport and money lost for a half hour in a Delhi airport. But going through those experiences brought so much life; meeting Blessed Mother Teresa; getting to know so many of her sisters and their beautiful life; the beauty of the foreign spiritual cultures; pilgrimages to see the Holy Father; Catholic Medical Association national and international meetings that have opened up so many doors to relationships and truth, and a sense of retreat. These mission adventures have paved the way for some of our children to attend real Catholic colleges. Mission has taught us how to laugh and pray through spiritual attack. The Blessed Mother, the angels and the saints are all powerful weapons, as is the name of Jesus.

A scripture from Phillipians helps me to disconnect from all those attractions of the culture of death that act like magnets in our lives:

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious; if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and seen in me (Paul), do; and the God of peace will be with you.

There is so much beautiful Catholic culture from Shakespeare to soccer, and so much beautiful nature from mountains to seas. This culture, do! Our homes and our marriages can be sanctuaries, even icons of God's total self-giving love.

And so, to close, here are a few weapons in our own war against the culture of death: plenty of family time, communication, planning and mission.

I would like to leave you with my favorite scripture from Ephesians:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father from whom every family in heaven and earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant to you to be strengthened with might through his spirit in the inner man, and that Christ might dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have the power to comprehend with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.
