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PIUS XII: THE POPE OF MEDICINE

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Pius XII—The Pope of Peace, the Pope of the People, the Modern Pope, the Pope of International Diplomacy—we could multiply well merited titles almost endlessly. To us Catholic doctors, however, and indeed to all doctors, he is the Pope of Medicine. No Pope in history has spoken so often and with such understanding eloquence on matters medical. On more than thirty occasions in the past decade, he counselled physicians directly on their rights and duties to themselves, to their patients and to the community at large. His frequent counsels and directives gave abundant evidence of the universality of his interest as Vicar of Christ on earth and his particular concern for the guardians of God's sick and ailing creatures.

In his pronouncements, he typified the attributes of a true physician: knowledge, sympathy and understanding, and the faculty to teach, counsel and direct. Excepting Sir William Osler, the medical profession has been at a loss for more than a century for such direction. In the void, medicine has strayed and assumed alien rights that reached colossal catastrophe in the mass experiments of the Third Reich. Pope Pius XII spoke forthrightly as the "interpreter of the moral conscience of the research worker" and the director of the physician "whose duty is to cure and aid—not to harm or kill."

The vast knowledge of His Holiness was demonstrated every time he talked to doctors and others directly or indirectly connected with health care. Of his address to a special meeting of cardiologists, the eminent Doctor Paul Dudley White said: "One of the best papers on coronary heart disease I have ever heard." He proved his knowledge of highly technological problems when speaking to a group of roentgenologists he referred to the "simple question of the heat to be eliminated in the generators of the x-ray," the "revolving anticathode of the tube" and varying vulnerability of tissues to the

"bombardment of infinitely small particles of extreme velocity."

Even fellow physicians do not commonly share with the ophthalmologists the knowledge of the corneal transplant operation that Pope Pius XII described so accurately. So accurately, in fact, that he was able to correct terminology then in common usage; and in so doing, give guidance to personnel of eye banks in the proper respect for the dead and the positive right to obtain material for transplant.

In greeting the anesthetists, he outlined their history from the unheralded nitrous oxide experiment of Horace Wells in 1845 through today's modern hypotonia for cardiac surgery. He gave specific directions on the rights of a patient to be relieved of pain, to accept pain for higher religious motives, but never for the sake of suffering itself, and he emphasized the rights of the dying to narcosis (alleviation of suffering through ethical use of drugs).

Again, in his addresses on cancer and polio, and on A.B.C. warfare, the knowledge of an expert in each field shone through. One might well conclude that such comprehension contained in the person of one human being could only be a gift of the Holy Ghost.

Turning now to the second facet of a medical personality, as exemplified by His Holiness, i.e. sympathy and understanding, His Holiness repeatedly referred to the sick, the suffering, and the tormented. During the Marian Year, the Pope gave a special radio talk to the sick of the Diocese of Rome in which He said "How We long to pass in the midst of you, drying tears, bringing comfort, healing wounds, giving back again strength and health." In consoling compassion he added: "But the sick are precious jewels of the Church and powerful sources of spiritual energy. They can find correction and expiation, tempering and purification and the opportunity for the salvation of

souls by example, by faith, — and on day of judgment you will at last see what extent the world of the health of your debtor."

Again, in the Apostolate of the Sick and Suffering he said, "We would like to share your worries and sorrows, but a little peace to your mind." He advised that the sick are not, as the sophisticated superficial world sees them, dull and useless; but rather, close to God and useful in the offering of their suffering in imitation, in example, and in atonement for the sins of others. How comforting both these addresses are to the patient immobilized by invalidism or terminal illness!

To the pharmacists and their alliance to the medical profession, he again showed his understanding in these words, "You lack the consolation that lightens the bitter tasks of doctors and nurses — the sight of an ailing patient recovering health."

To the nurses he said, "Your profession presupposes qualities out of the ordinary: a solid training, that is, technical knowledge thoroughly acquired and constantly kept up to date; a nimbleness of mind capable of continuously gleaming new ideas, applying new methods, using new instruments and medicines." He reminded them that they are the mothers of the sick as Our Blessed Lady, their model, is the Mother of all Mankind.

Addressing the World Congress on Fertility and Sterility, Pope Pius spoke of the "sad and painful" sacrifice of involuntary sterility. He commented on an increased birth rate as "the courage men show in the face of life with its risks and its difficulties."

Again, to the ophthalmologists he talked of the moral obligations due to a corpse as a result of the dignity it once possessed because it did house a soul and the kindness that must be tendered to the next of kin of the deceased.

His talks on natural painless childbirth, parenthood and marriage, moral and psychological problems occasioned by polio, are only a few additional examples of his abiding sympathy for and understanding of medical problems and especially the individuals plagued by them. Further evidence that he was the Pope of Medicine.

The faculty of teaching was another area in which Pope Pius XII excelled: talking on medicine to the International Congress of Medical History, he stated: "The doctor, whether he wishes to or not, must take a stand on human destiny. If

he acknowledges nothing outside of biochemical phenomena, does he not, by implication, admit the failure of all his efforts. This position is neither acceptable to man's conscience nor is it keeping with the spirit which inspired the long advance in medicine through the ages." Then, before the Latin Medical Union he gave a definition of the acceptable working norm of a doctor which exalts the profession to the dignity and nobility it enjoys. Here he said: "a patient is entitled to every consideration because he reflects the image of God. Any service which is rendered . . . is offered not alone to a man who is weak and unable to help himself but also to the Lord of All Creation. It is for this reason, the moral norms to which a doctor owes obedience go far beyond the prescriptions of a professional code of honor, they are . . . equivalent to a personal attitude towards a living God."

Thus establishing the basic tenet of a vocation in medicine Pius, at every opportunity presented, enunciated in no uncertain terms that the physician is "subject to the same broad moral and judicial principles that govern other men." He advocated an International Code of Ethics founded on three basic ideas:

1. Medical Ethics should be based on being and nature
2. Should conform to reason and finality
3. Should be rooted in the transcendental (Higher Authority)."

He added that moral duty is not subjective and dependent upon the pleasure of man but is objective and subject to Higher Authority. He further stressed that the doctor who does not know his moral obligations "must study into them." With this instruction he noted a glaring weakness in modern medical education which concentrates on the material aspects of science and pays little attention (except legally) to formal teaching of the rights and duties of the doctor to his patient.

The Holy Father in his frequent talks on medical matters was very specific. A few examples of his informed decisiveness on particular points are the following:

Artificial insemination, in or outside of marriage, is immoral and therefore wrong. It cannot be considered from a biological and medical point of view leaving out the integral natural act of the married partners. "To reduce the cohabitation of married persons and the conjugal act to a mere organic function for the transmission of the germ of life would be to convert

the domestic hearth sanctuary of the family, into nothing more than a biological laboratory."

His Holiness said further: "One of the most harmful aberrations that has appeared in modern society with its pagan tendencies is... Planned Parenthood; at times it is promoted by persons and organizations who command respect because of their positions in other fields but who have taken a stand in this matter which must be condemned." In this same treatise he mentioned: "confusing people... with misleading evidence, questionable polls, and even falsified statements from some clerics."

In his address to midwives, he stated: "Every human being, even the infant in the maternal womb, has the right to life immediately from God. Therefore, there is no man, no human authority, no science, no medical, eugenic social, economic or moral indication which can show or give a valid juridical title for the direct, deliberate disposition of a human being."

The Holy Father admonished the psychiatrists in these words, "no purely psychological treatment will cure a genuine sense of guilt." "Psychotherapy can not counsel a patient to commit maternal sins." Further, he condemned the Pansexual Method by emphasizing that man is not free "to arouse in himself for therapeutic reasons each and every appetite of the sexual order."

In stressing the limitations of medical research, he told the 8th Congress of the World Medical Association: "Man does not exist for the community. The Community exists for man." He clarified that man cannot transmit to others rights to his own body that he does not possess and, therefore, experimentation to mutilate or to the dangerous risk is wrong.

Further unequivocal directives on health matters weave a complete tapestry that symbolizes the Pope's interest in those afflicted with physical and mental trials.

Another characteristic of a good physician, which we mentioned, is the responsibility of giving wise counsel. Many brilliant gems in the special crown of the Pope of Medicine reflect his deep love for all in the health field. In his address on the Hospital Apostolate, Pius XII cautioned against allowing a patient to fall into a "certain anonymity" and suggested that the goal was "to know how to think of others, to be able to take to them an interest and a deep love." On heart disease, he rephrased the cardiologist's usual recommendation: "You also

be ready because at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come." To the doctors treating cancer, he proposed the two-fold question: "What do you expect to accomplish by therapeutic means? By pain relieving measures? What will be the benefit to the total person?" For the answers, Pius XII said: "Here science is almost completely overshadowed by the factors of human understanding."

At another time, discussing Medical Law and Morality, he indicated that Moral Law and Medical Law are distinct but need to support each other to avoid rigorism on the one side and individualism on the other." Further he warned that "when divorced from each other, juridic positivism results where morality is underemphasized and the law of political authority is considered valid." An example of this is the present day attitude of American courts toward a doctor's (professionally secret) office records.

On the question of large families, the Pope said, "the only way to protect the physical and moral health of the family and of society is the wholehearted obedience to the laws of nature. There is no system of eugenics that can improve on nature. History makes no mistake when it points to violation and abuse of the laws governing marriage and procreation as the primary cause of the decay of peoples. Demographic politics have failed because they have debased the dignity of the family and the person by placing them on the same plane as the lower species."

And on fertility, he warned that when the researcher applies his findings to man, it is impossible to ignore the repercussions which the proposed methods might have on the individual and his destiny.

His Holiness was constantly preoccupied by another of the attributes we mentioned above, namely, the faculty of direction. He never allowed any group to leave his presence without positive directions. To each he gave a charge and his charge was especially specific in the health field. A few examples follow:

In his address on the Apostolate of the Midwife he directed "Every profession brings with it a mission, the mission of putting into practice the teaching and intentions of the Creator and of aiding men to understand the justice and holiness of the Divine Plan."

Again, to the International Congress of Catholic Doctors, he stated: "Because you are Catholics does not mean that you practice a special type of medicine,

but you do have a particular way of considering your professional problems. The mentality of modern man leads him to search for breadth, unity and simplicity."

In his address on cancer, Pius XII indicated that the Creator allowed powerful anomalies called cancer to operate as well as more serious anomalies called leukemia. In the battle against the latter he asked a provocative question: "How does it happen that so often there is lacking the intensity of application with which humanity seeks out and combats physical pain?"

Of painless childbirth, the Vicar of Christ suggested: "The Christian... when faced with a new scientific discovery is careful not to admire it unreservedly and not to use it with exaggerated haste."

To the delegates of the International Poliomyelitis Conference, the Holy Father gave exhortation to extend their influence from the domain of therapy to the domain of human problems, to a complete understanding of man and the spiritual conditions of his life.

And, finally, to the roentgenologists he

gave that beautiful laudation: "The scholar who devotes himself to labor such as yours — in trying to know the inexhaustible riches of physical and living nature — discloses even a bit more of the treasures placed by the Creator in His handiwork."

Such is the inspiring legacy of Pope Pius XII. In an era when socialistic tendencies reduced men to the subservience of the State, he reaffirmed the dignity of man; when pragmatism dictated subjective morality, he restated the objectivity of morality in its source, the Divine Creator; when eugenic theories advanced excuses to satisfy human selfishness, he delineated the error proposed to abort the Divine plan; when doctors in the newer discipline of psychiatry invaded the secrecy of the human heart and mind, he pronounced the intrusion into the sacred precincts of the confessional. No previous pontiff, no doctor in this century, has advanced such clear directives to the profession. Pius XII merits well the title "Pope of Medicine."

Pope Pius XII: Medical Allocutions

IVth International Congress of Doctors
September 29, 1949—AAS*—p. p. 557-561

Comment on Artificial Insemination

Italian Union of Midwives

October 29, 1951—AAS—p. p. 835-854

Comment on a) Abortion

b) Birth prevention

c) Sterilization

d) Periodic continence

Convention of the Sodality "Family First"
November 26, 1951—AAS—p. p. 851-860

Comment on a) Abortion

b) Attempt to save life of both mother and child

Vth International Congress of Psychotherapy and Psychology
April 13, 1953—AAS—p. p. 278-286

Vth International Congress of Microbiology

September 13, 1953—AAS—p. p. 666-671

Ist Latin Congress of Ophthalmology
June 12, 1953—AAS—p. p. 418-42

Ist International Symposium of Genetics
September 7, 1953—AAS—p. p. 596-607

Comment on a) Sterilization

b) Prohibition of marriage for eugenic or genetic reasons

XXVIth Congress of Urologists

October 8, 1953—AAS—p. p. 674 sq.

Comment on a) Dicity of mutilation
b) Impotency

XVIIth Congress of Military Medicine

October 15, 1953—AAS—p. p. 744-754

IIIrd International Congress on Poliomyelitis

September 11, 1954—p. p. 533-536

Congress of Medical Radiology

April 4, 1954—AAS—p. p. 214-218

Congress of The History of the Art of Medicaments

September 11, 1954—AAS—p. p. 536-540

- XIVth International Congress of The
History of the Art of Medicine
September 17, 1954—AAS—p. p. 557-
580
- VIIIth Congress of World Society of
Doctors
September 30, 1954—AAS—p. p. 587-
598
Comment on a) Experimentation on
Living Man
b) Principles on which
moral aspects of Medi-
cine are based
- IVth International Congress of The Latin
Medical Union
April 7, 1955—AAS—p. p. 275-281
- To The Doctors of Naples
November 11, 1955—AAS—p. p. 829-
833
- To Those Who Teach Obstetrics and
Gynecology
January 8, 1956—AAS—p. p. 82-93
Comment on—Natural Childbirth
- Congress of Doctors Who Contributed
to Symposium on Coronary Arteries
May 8, 1956—AAS—p. p. 454-459
- Italian Union of The Blind
May 14, 1956—AAS—p. p. 459-467
Comment on—Corneal Transplants
- World Congress on Fertility and Sterility
May 19, 1956—AAS—p. p. 467-475
- XIth Congress on Chemotherapy
October 6, 1956—AAS—p. p. 793
Comment on—Medical Therapy in
Humans
- Society of Anaesthesiology
February 24, 1957—AAS—p. p. 12 sq.
- Doctors in Administration and
Teaching
September 27, 1957—AAS—p. p. 127-
- XIIth International Congress on Ortho-
dontology
September 8, 1957—AAS—p. p. 84-
- Medical and Applied Psychology
Congress of Inf. Assn. of Applied Psy-
chology—April 10, 1958
- Plastic Surgery—October, 1958
- ANCILLARY:
- Nursing: A True and Sacred Ministry
Oct. 2, 1953
- The Spirit of Sickness Feb. 14, 1954
- Pharmacy: An Ancient and
Modern Art Sept. 11, 1954
- Dietetics: and the Nation's Health
Sept. 25, 1955
- Cancer: A Medical and Social
Problem Aug. 19, 1956
- A Doctor's Prayer: May, 1957
- The Apostolate of the Sick and
Suffering Oct. 7, 1957
- The Large Family July 20, 1958
- * Acta Apostolicae Sedis. This is the offi-
cial publication of the Holy See since
1909.

