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Saints Cosmas and Damian

C. Francis Werts, M.D.

SAINTS COSMAS AND DAMIAN share with Saint Luke the position of patrons of the medical profession. It is with embarrassment that I admit ignorance of this fact until very recently, although I had pursued my medical career for a decade, after a long course in exclusively Catholic institutions of learning. Saints Cosmas and Damian were selected by the Catholic Church as examples for those of us who are aspiring to reach the goal they now possess, and aspiring to that end in the same external circumstances of life. If we do not strive for the attainment of that blessed goal they now hold, we must face the only alternative, namely, damnation.

It occurred to me that perhaps many others have failed to become cognizant of the dignified position of Saints Cosmas and Damian, and I therefore felt that I might make amends for my culpable ignorance by bringing the knowledge of these saints to others. It may indeed be unnecessary to bring Saints Cosmas and Damian to the readers of the LINACRE QUARTERLY, but if only a few come to appreciate them I shall feel well recompensed.

Saints Cosmas and Damian lived and died in the third century, in Arabia. They are mentioned in the Roman Martyrology along with their three brothers: "Anthimus, Leontius, and Euprepus, whose feast commemorating their martyrdom occurs September 27. The known facts of the latter three are indeed scant, but a number of items concerning Cosmas and Damian have reached us, and these are sufficient to enthrone them in our esteem and to afford us worthy exemplars in our professional life.

Cosmas and Damian were Christians from childhood who apparently enjoyed education beyond the average. We read in *The Liturgical Year*, by the Benedictine Gueranger, that they studied Hippocrates and Galen with enthusiasm, and correctly concluded that the perfection of the human body was but a faint reflection of the Divine Wisdom it so eloquently manifests. They accepted their art as a sacred ministry, and served their Maker in

His suffering members. So altruistically did they perform their office that they were known as the "Anargyres" (from the Greek *alpha*—privative, without, and *arguros*, silver). Lest this might occasion an odious comparison with men of our day, one might work with pure love in his heart in spite of the necessity of fees that arises from our economic structure today.

Their fame was enhanced by miraculous cures attributed to them, and it is clear that God's mark of approval rested on them even in their life time. Such events scarcely escaped the attention of the governing powers, and Lysias, the prefect under Rome, ordered them before him. He sought to learn the secret of their powers and way of life, but they openly professed their religion and refused to adore the gods of the Romans, knowing well the penalty that millions of their co-religionists had paid in the name of Christ. The threat of torture was a futile gesture, for the Saints were equal to any ingenious machinations of torture their pagan captors could devise.

They were committed to dens of wild beasts; they were chained and hurled into the sea; they were bound to burning stakes; they were the targets of archers — all with impunity. Finally they yielded up their souls at the blow of the executioners' sword, and won the palm of martyrdom.

Patron saints are selected by the Church for the good of the living. Those glorious confessors and martyrs need no further adulation from the Church militant. The Church triumphant furnishes fulfillment of every lawful aspiration. But the Church militant needs the stimulation of their example, and they are selected because they are appropriate for that purpose. Hence it behooves each one of us to know them better, to imitate them closely and eventually to share their magnificent reward; otherwise, life is a complete failure.

Three items are most worthy of consideration in this account of Saints Cosmas and Damian: these Saints were practicing physicians; they had the gift of miracles; finally they achieved the martyr's crown. These items shall merit comment in the reverse order.

Saints Cosmas and Damian achieved the martyr's crown. Does this not immediately single them out and elevate them to a plane so

far removed from us that *prima facie* they become subjects of admiration but scarcely imitation for us in the profession. Perhaps that were so if martyrs were made at the time of their martyrdom. In the annals of the martyrs, there are examples of the effects of grace so overwhelming that unbelievers so clearly saw truth that they joyfully died for it minutes later. Persecutors have joined their intended victims. But in so many more cases, martyrdom was begun long before the day of consummation. The martyrdom of life-long observance of the commandments: the martyrdom of devotion to duty that was rarely easy; the martyrdom of patience in the presence of constant provocation; the martyrdom of virtue when vice demanded descent from the cross; all of these constitute a real martyr. How few martyrs there would be if their altars did not contain the ash of sacrifice of yesterday and yesteryear! And here the application to ourselves becomes clear. The life of a Christian can never digress from the Royal Road of the Cross. Whether the last moment is obvious to others as a consummation is but incidental. The essential is that our life must be a profession of the teachings of Christ, wherever that may lead. Saints Cosmas and Damian began that course early, and in this respect we may imitate them closely.

The second remarkable circumstance of the life of these men lay in the fact that miraculous powers were accorded them during their life-time. Certainly in that respect they are singled out to a degree that defies our imitation. Here again we behold a circumstance that is not essential either to sanctity or salvation. The power of miracles rests in God alone whatever the instrument that appears before man. The spittle and clay that Christ placed in the eyes of the man born blind was as effective as any instrument ever employed in the external manifestation of God's supernatural power. Hence the fact of miracles, while it carries the stamp of approval of God upon the person concerned, is not *per se* a sanctifying factor. Rather the virtue of the individual may predispose the providence of God in this direction at that particular time for a very particular purpose. Scripture tells us that the Apostles rejoiced that such power, namely that of miracles, was given them. We may assume that Judas was among them, and while it is not our office to decide his final fate, yet the fact of miracles did not confirm him in grace. Hence we may again emphasize the important

fact that Saints Cosmas and Damian lived virtuous lives in circumstances not unlike our own, and so achieved sanctity. Miracles followed, but did not precede or cause their virtue.

Finally, these saints were practicing physicians whose duties certainly had the identical relationship to their patients that prevails between doctor and patient today. Certainly their religious duties received exacting attention, but they were not canonized because they spent time in the observance of monastic discipline. The fact remains that the everyday duties of the professional man, dramatic and routine, have the tremendous possibilities of conferring sanctity upon those performing them with a right intention. Is the entire profession, then, to enjoy that distinction simply because their external duties bear that resemblance or identity to the life and duties of Cosmas and Damian? Unfortunately that is not the case. Only those will achieve this blissful end who fulfill two conditions, and these are not above the reach of any man of good will. First, all actions must be performed with the simple good intention of pleasing God, and the second follows as a corollary: the person concerned must be in the state of sanctifying grace. This latter condition seems so very obvious that it needs no discussion, for a person without grace could scarcely tend in the direction of salvation, much less sanctification. Pertinent to the first condition, any wrong intention would vitiate even the most sacred duties, and it is clear that the intention remains the factor which gives life to the objective actions of individuals.

The Church which transcends all ages has exercised wisdom in selecting these saints for our admiration and imitation. It remains for us therefore to select those essential factors in their lives that pertains to us, and to follow them. Nor need we be alone in this, for help from above is certainly forthcoming from those saints we honor, for we daily invoke them when we intelligently attend Mass and reverently repeat at each canon: "*Communicantes et memoriam venerantes . . . beatorum apostolorum ac martyrum tuorum . . . Cosmae et Damiani . . . quorum meritis precibus que concedas ut in omnibus protectionis tuae muniamur auxilio.*"