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## The Physician and Suffering

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AMONG the great gifts of a generous God may be counted Life itself. However, it is given to man with certain reservations. In bestowing such a gift, God reserves to Himself the right to regulate the life through the laws of nature, and even to determine the limit of its earthly endurance. Truly, this is God's prerogative; no man may appropriate that right to himself, or even interfere with it. That man who wilfully destroys life, either his own or that of another, has always been regarded as guilty of a grave and hideous crime.

From this basic principle, the goal of medical science becomes evident: to preserve, to strengthen human life within the limits determined by Almighty God. Such a noble goal demands of the physician the conscientious fulfillment of the arduous task of studying, of taking care of the human body, of alleviating bodily sufferings and of curing its ailments. Never may he forget that the human body is not a machine destined to destruction. Remember he must, in all circumstances, that the human body is truly the temple of God, destined to exist in the eternal glory of heaven. What a sublime calling! For, in curing the physical organism of man, the physician helps to reconstruct the divine temple.

To fulfill this high mission, the physician necessarily needs not only knowledge, but also, in equal measure, charity as well. By profession, the physician is not merely a scientist; he is, in a certain sense, a *priest of that science* dedicated to the bodily welfare of the human race.

Some years ago, in welcoming a group of physicians, the Holy Father spoke of the close resemblance between the priestly and medical ministries. The Holy Father clearly pointed out that the priestly ministry is also a medical ministry because its purpose is to bring health and soundness to souls. Being both preservative and curative, the priestly ministry aids in restoring health to the body. Illustrating His own office, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Divine Founder of the priesthood called Himself, Physician; and again, when He said

to those who reproached Him for associating with sinners, "They that are in health need not a *physician* but they that are ill."

A being of soul and of body, man expresses unity of life and action. Spiritual medicine, therefore, will be allied to corporal medicine. In fact, the physician of the soul may do much to make easier the work of the physician of the body. The latter may be also the physician of the soul; he effects such a nobility, not only indirectly by the honest exercise of his profession, but directly by his own spiritual standards. Grateful are we to the many physicians who have been and are real precursors of the priest in the care of souls.

Throughout your years of experience, you have come face to face with misery and illness of every description. Your profession necessarily demands that you overcome any natural repugnance to which such sights and contacts give rise. Animated by the proper spirit, a good physician does not lose his sense of commiseration and sympathy for those who suffer; rather, the good physician continuously strives to refine and to increase that sense during all the days of his profession. To be truly and sincerely sympathetic in mind and heart, is one of the most powerful remedies of the physician's profession. In this, he perfects his role as priest of the medical science. Never will he allow a sufferer to feel shame at seeking human sympathy and understanding. Did not the strongest Man this earth has ever seen seek human consolation in His suffering? What did He receive? Those whom He had saved, those whom He had counselled and consoled, utterly neglected Him. As if nothing at all were to happen, they slept on, in a deep calm, as He suffered and prepared to die for them. Abandoned by men, left alone to suffer the greatest physical and mental pain that *any man* has ever endured, Christ experienced such utter desolation as to be beyond the descriptive power of any mortal. It is true that Christ was Divine, but He was perfectly human as well. Filled with a tenderness beyond our weak comprehension, His human heart sought in vain for a word, one kind word of human consolation. How tragic!

Great will be the charity, the mercy of that physician who instills into his incurably suffering patient the desire to turn to Christ, to find in *Him* the great consoler of Mankind. Throughout His earthly life, the merciful Christ brought anew health to diseased bodies, sight to blind eyes, strength to paralyzed limbs and even life to the dead. As then, so now the mercifully risen Christ remains, for all time, the one, great Physician of the universe.

Great too will be the eternal reward of that physician who gives to his patients his own deep-rooted conviction, that suffering, in any form,

can be for the sick a means to go to God. At the moment a man learns that he really needs God, at that very moment he has begun to grasp the real purpose of life. What a bitter lesson! Yet, a very profitable one for it is then that man begins to see that suffering is, in reality, an invitation to turn to God. Before the eyes of the suffering must be held that eternal principle: No one is too small; no one is unimportant to be the concern of God. *To every sufferer* the outstretched arms of Christ on the Crucifix beckon to come to Him. The more completely, the more confidently the suffering soul places itself in the arms of the Crucified the more certainly will that soul be using pain as a *stepping-stone* to its eternal union with God. Truly, here, in suffering, is the invitation to spiritual greatness.

But the sorrow and tragedy of it all is that pain can be seen in a wholly different light. The modern world would never dare to think of going directly to God for consolation. Yet, it has not offered, it cannot offer, any worthwhile substitute to a soul sunk in the depths of intense and incurable suffering. The modern world, with its glorification of all that is material and transitory, ridicules, scoffs at the Christian philosophy of suffering. Yet, what promises has the modern world offered to the advocates of its philosophy? Perhaps, fame or gain passing with time. But, what promises, what rewards can be given to those, of firm conviction in mind and heart, of the Christian philosophy of suffering? "Come, ye blessed of my Father, possess you the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me to drink; I was a stranger, and you took me in. Naked, and you covered me; sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me. Then shall the just answer Him, saying: Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee; thirsty and gave thee to drink? When did we see thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and covered thee? Or when did we see thee sick or in prison, and come to thee? and the King answering, shall say to them: Amen, I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these, my least brethren, you did it to ME."

*The above was addressed to members of the medical staff of Our Lady of Mercy Hospital, Mariemont, Cincinnati, Ohio on the occasion of the Mass of Thanksgiving offered in the hospital chapel on the Feast of The Holy Family.*

*Some 50 of our Catholic hospitals inaugurated the custom of celebrating the Obstetricians' Mass of Thanksgiving this year. Several hospitals invited all staff physicians for the occasion. Happy to plan this for their doctors, many of our administrators reported enthusiastic acceptance of the plan and will observe this Mass annually on the Feast of the Holy Family.*