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## The Catholic Physician

P. H. YANCEY, S.J.

Moderator

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MEDICINE has always been intimately linked with religion from the earliest times and among all peoples. In the Western World the physicians are said to have been the *Asclepiades* or priests of Asclepius, the Greek god of healing, more familiarly known by his Latin name of Aesculapius. Hippocrates of Cos, generally recognized as the "Father of Medicine," belonged to the *Asclepiades*. Of course, these early priest-physicians relied chiefly on magic, since little real knowledge of the causes of disease then existed. Nevertheless, it was fitting that those who ministered to the body should also have the soul's welfare at heart.

Christianity did not change this relationship appreciably. We know that Our Blessed Lord used miracles of healing as the most potent argument for His Divinity and the truth of His teaching, so much so that He has often been called "The Divine Physician." The Apostles, too, as well as later saintly missionaries to heathen lands, also relied a great deal on healing to convince unbelievers of the truth of Christianity.

When the faith had been firmly established and there was no longer any need for such miracles, the healing art became separated from the priesthood, though the Church always fostered the study of medicine by laymen in her universities. Vesalius, Fallopius, Fabricius, the teacher of William Harvey, and Thomas Linacre, physician to three English kings and founder of the Royal College of Physicians, are names famous in the annals of medicine.

Unfortunately this close relationship between religion and medicine was disturbed by the religious upheaval of the 16th Century. More and more there was a tendency to separate medical science from all religious influence. This reached its peak during the so-called "Age of Enlightenment" in the 18th Century which led to the machine-concept of life in general and to the complete denial of the soul in man. This has had dire consequences not only for religion but also for medicine.

In the first place, it has tended to dehumanize the practice of medicine. For, whereas formerly the object of the physician's care was a person, especially in the case of the old family doctor, whom he knew

intimately (often having brought him into the world), now, too often, the patient is only a "case." At its best, this approach led to a false scientific detachment; at its worst, to the horrors of human experimentation, as practiced by certain German physicians during the Nazi regime. Neither of these approaches is proper to a Catholic physician.

What, then, is the proper attitude of the Catholic physician toward his profession? To begin with, he must be thoroughly imbued with the dignity of his calling. For while, of course, like any other career it has to provide him and his family with a decent living, he should not have taken it up or now pursue it merely with the idea of making money. While this is not common, there are not lacking in the medical profession men of this type. They are the ones who are largely responsible for recent undeserved attacks on the profession as a whole. But the Catholic physician while not neglecting medical economics, will also not forget Christ's poor but, considering his knowledge as a gift of God, will devote a certain amount of his time and skill to bringing them also the benefits of his art.

Then there are some who look upon the practice of medicine in the same way as say a biologist, a chemist, or a physicist looks upon his profession, that is, simply as an experimental science divorced from any other considerations. As most of you know, I would be the last to decry a truly scientific approach to medicine. For more than thirty years I have been engaged in giving students the maximum of scientific preparation for the study of medicine and encouraging them both before and after graduation not only to learn the most they can of what has already been discovered but also to advance by their own research the science and art of medicine.

Nevertheless, it is not only possible but also a fact that some practitioners in their supposed zeal for "scientific" medicine, think nothing of transgressing moral law and, if they think they can get away with it, even civil laws. Of course, it has been demonstrated time and time again that this is not only bad morality, but also bad medicine. All of you are familiar with many such practices. Still, due to the fact that some Catholic physicians either do not have the time or the inclination to find out what is really scientific in such cases they sometimes feel themselves at a disadvantage *vis-a-vis* their non-Catholic colleagues. It is one of the purposes of the Guild to keep the Catholic physician up to date on such debated questions.

The proper attitude of the Catholic doctor towards his profession is to look upon it as a *vocation* in the same sense as the priest regards his life work. It is truly a "calling" and the One who calls is the same Lord

Who said to His Apostles, "You have not chosen Me but I have chosen you; and have appointed you that you should go and bring forth fruit; and your fruit should remain." (Jo. 15:16)

It is not necessary for the doctor, anymore than for the priest, to have been given any special revelation, such as St. Paul received on the way to Damascus, in order to be "called." All that is necessary in both cases is that they have the proper qualifications, the desire, and the will to fulfill the requirements of their respective callings. The difference between such a vocation and a mere career lies in its motivation. A true vocation comes from God and its acceptance is based on the motive of love of God. It is true that this is more apparent in the priestly vocation because of the nature of the priest's life and work. However, it is not less true of any other vocation, particularly of that of the physician. For who approximates closer the function of the priest than the doctor? The priest (and often the doctor himself) generates through baptism new children of God; the doctor brings them into the world. The priest nurses their souls with the Bread of Life and heals their spiritual wounds in the sacrament of penance; the doctor performs similar functions with respect to their bodies. And, while the priest prepares the soul for its last journey, the physician does all in his power to make this transition as peaceful as possible.

Finally, while it has long been recognized that the physical condition of the body is often reflected in the soul, there are certain diseases of the mind that require more than drugs or surgery. The physician who knows not only his medicine but also his religion and what it has to offer to these suffering members of Christ's body, will really deserve to hear on the Day of Judgment those words of Our Blessed Savior, "Inasmuch as ye did it to one of my least ones, ye did it unto Me. Come ye blessed of My Father."

Let me end with the significant words of St. Paul to the Corinthians (I, 1, 26) "See your vocation, brethren." You have within your power more than is given to most men to influence for good or for evil your fellow men. If you consider your profession a real call from God to cooperate with Him in creating and preserving human life, you will be as Christ once said of His disciples as it were "gods" and will deserve to be made sons of God and heirs of heaven.

*Father Yancey is Chairman of the Department of Biology, Spring Hill College, Mobile, Alabama, and Moderator of the newly formed Catholic Physicians' Guild of Mobile. The above address was delivered at the Guild's first meeting.*