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Catholic Doctors – Should They Be Different?

J. J. Billings, M.D.

Dr. Billings gave this address to the Medical Guild of St. Luke at Mt. Olivet Hospital, Brisbane, Australia, in July, 1982.

There are many people whose lives are an inspiration to those involved in the care of the sick. One such was St. John of God who was born in Portugal in 1495. After a somewhat wayward existence he determined, in 1539, to devote himself to the sick and destitute. He took a house where, for 10 years, he sheltered and cared for those in need, not excluding prostitutes and vagabonds, although he was sometimes criticized for helping them. After his death, his followers were organized into the Order of Hospitallers, the Brothers of St. John of God, whose work has spread far and wide.

In the middle of the River Tiber, where it passes through the heart of Rome, is the Tiber Island, also called the "Island of Healing." Nearly 200 years before Christ, a temple was built there to the Greek god of medicine, Aesculapius. The devotion to Aesculapius came to an end under the Emperor Constantine early in the 4th century A.D. and the Benedictine monks, to whom we owe the preservation of the writings of Hippocrates and other Greek physicians, built a small church beside the ruins of the pagan temple. About 1000 A.D., Emperor Otto III built a larger church on the temple site and dedicated it to St. Adalbert. Since relics of the apostle St. Bartholomew were deposited there, the church eventually became known as St. Bartholomew's. St. Bartholomew's Hospital at Smithfields in London was established by an English minstrel who recovered from illness after drinking water from an ancient well on this site.

On Tiber Island, the Franciscan friars took over from the Benedictines in the 16th century until the Hospitallers of St. John of God arrived in Rome in 1584 and purchased an old Benedictine monastery where their hospital, dedicated to St. John Calybit, now exists. It is known as the Fatebenefratelli Hospital and is the motherhouse of the

Hospitaller Order. The word *fatebenefratelli* means "do well brothers," and was a name given to the Brothers of St. John of God because of their custom, in walking about Rome seeking alms, of saying, "Do good to yourselves — give alms."

In April, 1981, during a course of a visit to the hospital of St. John Calybit, so steeped in medical history, Pope John Paul reminded physicians of the nobility of their calling in these terms:

"Beloved doctors, I willingly take this opportunity to reaffirm also to you, as I have done on other occasions, the benevolence, the esteem and the hope that the Church places in you and your experience in such a noble and generous mission as that of service to suffering brothers and sisters. I am happy, in this connection, to borrow the words of my venerated predecessor, Pius XII, addressed to a group of surgeons in 1945: 'How elevated, how worthy of every honor is the nature of your profession! The doctor has been designated by God to meet the needs of suffering humanity. He Who created this being, consumed by fever or lacerated, whom you see here in your hands, He Who loves him with an eternal love, has entrusted to you the ennobling task of restoring him to health. You bring to the sick person's room and to the operating table something of the charity of God, of the love and tenderness of Christ, the great physician of the soul and body. This charity is not a superficial sentiment which lacks firmness . . . it is in fact love which embraces the whole person, a being who is a brother in humanity, and whose sick body is still animated by an immortal soul, whom all the rights of creation and redemption unite with the will of his Divine Master.' "

A Quote from Pius XII

Pope John Paul went on to say: "I wish to quote this stupendous passage of Pius XII's address because it highlights the mission of doctors and the human and Christian solidarity they must show with their doctrine and with the advances of experimentation. You too, under the severe scientific investigation which is always necessary to a precise diagnosis, be inspired by humanity and a deep sympathy toward those who have recourse to your help. Be always ministers of life; never, never instruments of death! Do everything with love, for love of Christ, Who will not leave unrewarded all that you do for the humblest of His fellow men, because He wished to identify Himself with each of them: 'As long as you did it for one of these least brothers of mine, you did it for me' (Mt. 25:40).

"May this ideal motive sustain you in your profession. May it be the secret heartbeat that ennobles your efforts; may it be the sacred commitment that makes you perceive in the suffering, especially in the most abandoned, the painful face of Christ and His grateful expression. Let yourselves be guided by these sentiments in the care of

your patients and 'the God of love and peace will be with you' " (2 Cor. 13:11).

It has been my regular experience, during some 40 years of medical practice, to find it is those whom we might be most likely to call "ordinary people" who respond most readily to the challenge of the ideal, who understand the difference between the way of duty and the way of love — in a word, the spirit in which God's laws are to be obeyed. The words of these two great popes of the 20th century are calling doctors back to a true realization of their vocation.

It is unfortunate that many Catholic Medical Guilds have been conspicuously inactive in recent years, at a time when the generality of the medical profession has deserted its Hippocratic ethic and, as a consequence, has lost its way. It has, to a large extent, condoned abortion, accepting the change from its traditional role of striving always to cure disease and relieve suffering to the use of its skills in the destruction of life. Abortion is still not recognized by many people for what it is: the greatest social evil of this generation, an evil which has corrupted not only the medical profession, but also the whole of society.

One must ask why abortion has come to be tolerated by the medical profession and, at the same time, why the Catholic doctors who, almost to a man, will condemn abortion as long as they go on calling themselves Catholic, have been a less cohesive force for good. It is, I believe, because they too have been confused by the same corrupt sexual morality that has permeated modern society and persuades many people to tolerate abortion.

It cannot be denied that a degree of disunity exists among Catholic doctors, and that this disunity began over the issue of contraception, particularly with the publication of the encyclical, *Humanae Vitae* in 1968.

Early in my medical practice, Catholic doctors were constantly being reminded to take proper care that their decisions, actions, and the advice they gave, would conform to Catholic moral standards. We had priests to advise us and sound textbooks on medico-moral problems, and we could virtually always be sure that the spiritual counseling we sought would be in conformity with the teaching of the Magisterium of the Church.

Now the situation is somewhat different. Often we are advised that many of these problems are too difficult for anyone but a moral theologian to solve, although with remarkable inconsistency, each of us is encouraged to follow his own conscience.

A basic decision of conscience which a Catholic makes, whether he is a doctor or not, is to be a Catholic. This means he believes that Christ founded the Church and said: "Teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And to know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time" (Mt. 28, 20). At Caesarea Philippi, Christ told

Peter he was the rock on which He would build His Church (Mt. 16, 18).

The advent of chemical contraception was accompanied by the propagation of a myth that the medication was imitating normal physiology. It was therefore reasonable for careful consideration of the question as to whether this means of avoiding pregnancy fell outside the traditional Catholic teaching which rejected contraception. In *Casti Connubii*, Pius XI had branded the use of contraceptives as a violation of the natural law. Pius XII reinforced this teaching and finally, Paul VI emphasized the clear principle underlying it, that each and every marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life.

At the time when Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae*, there was considerable agony of conscience among Catholics and others all over the world regarding contraception. The Holy Father knew that, and when he introduced the encyclical, he used these words:

"No believer will wish to deny that the teaching authority of the Church is competent to interpret even the natural moral law . . .

". . . after mature reflection and assiduous prayers, We now intend, by virtue of the mandate entrusted to Us by Christ, to give Our reply to these grave questions."

At the Synod of Bishops in Rome in 1980, called to consider the role of the Christian family in the modern world, my wife, Lyn, and I were privileged to be *auditores*. The bishops who are the *doctores fidei*, in affirming their support for the Church's teaching on contraception, appealed to theologians to help people understand the difference, both anthropological and moral, between contraception and recourse to natural means of regulating fertility. This was a response to the failure of some Catholic people to give loyal external and internal assent; having found the teaching contained in *Humanae Vitae* unacceptable, they have even gone on to reject the authority of the Magisterium altogether.

There are, of course, more commandments than the sixth and the ninth. However, the issue of contraception is of major importance for two reasons. Contraception strikes at conjugal love and for that reason, exerts a disruptive influence upon family life. Additionally, disordered ideas regarding human sexuality give an emotional impetus to the rejection of the authority which is teaching sound morality.

Contrary to what is sometimes suggested, there are *not* many people who regard contraception as the only sin. Unfortunately, there are a number of Catholics who believe that it is not a sin at all. This is regrettable, not only because they have rejected the authority of the Church, but also because they have not perceived that contraception is evil. Contraception attacks life at its source; it is anti-life in its essence. In a prophetic way, *Humanae Vitae* warned explicitly against abortion. Who could have thought, in 1968, that within so few years abortion could become the epidemic evil it is now all around the

world? Contraception involves rejection of the child that might result from an act of coitus, and there is now no organization in the world promoting contraception that does not also promote sterilization and abortion. The difference between recourse to the natural reproductive rhythms and contraception, as Pope John Paul has pointed out in *Familiaris Consortio*, is a "difference which is much wider and deeper than is usually thought, one which involved, in the final analysis, two irreconcilable concepts of the human person and of human sexuality. The choice of the natural rhythms involves accepting the cycle of the person, that is the woman, thereby accepting dialogue, reciprocal respect, shared responsibility and self-control. To accept the cycle and to enter into dialogue means to recognize both the spiritual and corporal character of conjugal communion, and to live personal love with its requirement of fidelity."

Therein lies the tragedy, that when the world needed so much to hear a voice of sanity, that voice was sometimes not heard because so many stood silent, or because the voice was muffled by the cries of dissent.

So it is too with direct sterilization, which has been condemned as unlawful. The Synod of Bishops described it as "even worse than contraception." Again, there is the pity that there has been a failure to recognize fertility as an essential and vital part of the whole human organism, giving the husband and wife power to share in the creation of new human life by an act of love which will have effect throughout eternity, that it is their fertility which is the bond of strength to keep them united in love.

Australian Conference Statement

The Australian Episcopal Conference in 1976 sent a statement to the directors of Catholic family planning centers and priests connected with this work, that "the authentic teaching of the Catholic Church contained in *Humanae Vitae* that 'every action which either in anticipation of the conjugal act or its accomplishment, or in the development of its natural consequences, proposes, whether as an end or a means, to render procreation impossible' is 'intrinsically evil' and to be absolutely excluded, binds the consciences of all without ambiguity and excludes the possibility of a probable opinion opposed to this teaching." Germain Grisez spoke to Catholic doctors as well as married couples when he said, "The proper theological name for natural family planning is 'Christian Chastity.'"

Catholic doctors support and are supported by the Catholic hospitals. The doctors have a very important mission to make possible the work for which Catholic hospitals have been founded. The Catholic hospital is there to provide a Catholic standard of health care. When a

Catholic institution exists in the community, it is there to do its work in accordance with Catholic moral teaching. The institution has a conscience which is the collective conscience of the people who are in charge of it; they cannot evade responsibility for that conscience. If it provides something which, by Catholic standards, is objectively evil, the purpose for which the institution came into existence no longer exists and both the institution and the order which was responsible for its foundation will, in fact, cease to exist.

We have heard a good deal about the matter of being in "good conscience." The Catholic finds himself in good conscience when he has taken care to be in correct conscience, and he knows that he is in correct conscience when he is following the teaching of the Magisterium of the Church. Those who give and promote allegiance to this authentic teaching are sometimes described as judgmental, moralizing, evangelistic, legalistic, restrictive, rigid, uncharitable or perhaps antiquated. Yet we believe in a God of love, which means that we accept His laws as laws of love, made for our own good. Christ said, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (John 14, 15) and again, "If you keep My commandments, you will remain in My love" (John 15, 10).

The summons to do good does not present alternatives, it imposes a duty. Charity demands that we help people do what they ought to do and not do what they ought not do. To help people act in obedience to God's laws is to work in the service of love. True compassion always contains the truth. As Pope Paul VI said in *Humanae Vitae*: "It is an excellent work of divine love to lessen in no way the saving law of Christ" (N. 29).

Francois Mauriac once wrote: "Christ will give you a clear understanding of what you are: an immortal soul, not one living in isolation, but one surrounded by a great many other souls over whom you exercise power for better or for worse.

"When grace diminishes in you, it diminishes in a great many others who depend upon you. If you are a friend of Christ, many others will warm themselves at this fire, will share in this light.

"The darkness of sin in you will cast its shadow over those whom you now enlighten. And the day when you no longer burn with love, many others will die of the cold."