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MAN, THE OBJECT OF MEDICINE

*His Excellency, THE MOST REVEREND GERALD P. O'HARA, D.D.,
Bishop of Savannah-Atlanta.*

"But that you may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (He saith to the sick of the palsy), I say to thee: arise take up thy bed and go into thy house."

—MARK, 2:10-11.

THE words that you have just heard remind us of a very dramatic and touching incident that took place during the close of our Savior's life.* It happened in Capharnaum where our Lord was delivering a discourse in a house that probably belonged to Simon Peter. The Gospels tell us that a huge crowd came to Capharnaum upon hearing that our Lord was there. They filled the house. They surrounded it. They thronged the very streets leading to where our Lord was speaking. In the midst of his talk, four men were seen approaching the house carrying a sick man—a paralytic. Because of the crowd their efforts to enter the house were futile so they resorted to an extraordinary means of bringing the sick man into the presence of our Lord. Somehow they managed to climb to the roof of the house. They removed the tiles and let the paralytic down by means of a sheet to the very side of Christ. We can well imagine what must have been the emotion of all present at this sight. We know from what happened how the suppliant's faith deeply touched our Lord. Unbelief alone displeased him but faith never left him unmoved. And that manifested on this occasion was so intense that we might almost call it heroic. There was the undaunted faith of the men carrying the sick man. There was also the faith of the man himself who consented to the procedure. Neither they nor the paralytic wanted to lose an opportunity which might never return. Three of the Evangelists make special mention of this faith. "Our Lord", says St. Mark, "seeing their faith, said to the sick man, be of good heart, son, thy sins are forgiven".

* Sermon, Commencement Exercises. February 28, 1946, St. Louis University School of Medicine, St. Louis, Mo.

It is rather remarkable that our Lord appeared to ignore, at least for the moment, the principal purpose for which the man was let down before him. Before curing him of his paralysis, He first forgave him his sins. Here we are face to face with a power that could heal both soul and body.

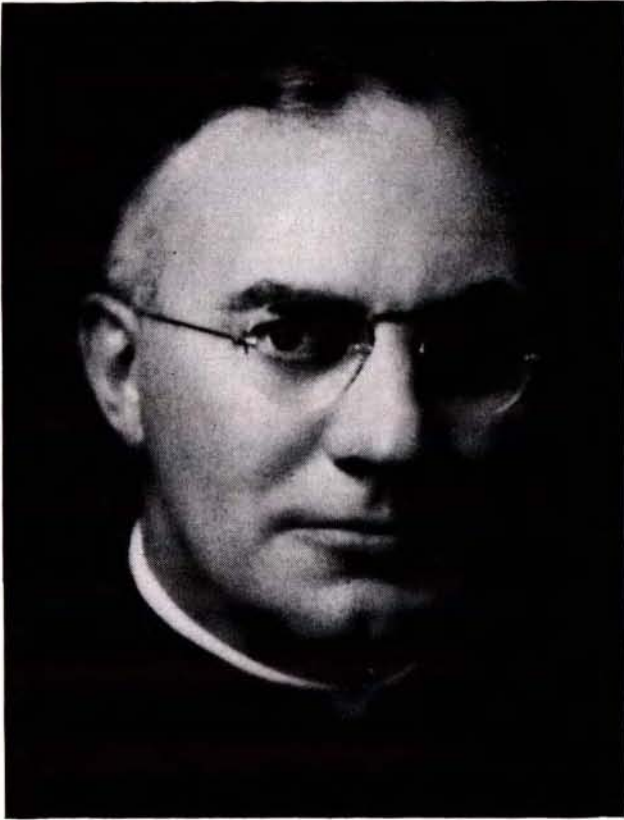
Witnesses to this incident undoubtedly sent by the High Priest, were not lacking. They had come from surrounding cities, as the Gospels tell us, even from Jerusalem. They professed to be shocked when our Lord said "thy sins are forgiven thee". "Why doth this man speak thus. He blasphemeth. Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Our Lord reading their thoughts and hearing their words said "which is easier to say to the sick of the palsy: thy sins are forgiven thee: or to say: arise, take up thy bed and walk". There must have been a dramatic pause at this point. Continuing, our Lord said: "but that you may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins (he saith to the sick of the palsy) I say to thee: arise, take up thy bed and go into thy house. And immediately he arose and taking up his bed went his way in the sight of all so that all wondered and glorified God saying: we never saw the like".

As I said above, in this incident we find a certain identification of a two-fold healing power, the spiritual in forgiving sins and the physical in healing the man stricken and bed-ridden for years. To understand that there is such an identification to some degree and that the power of both the spiritual and physical healing are in a sense mutually interdependent and that while Christ, the Son of God, exercised both powers in virtue of His divinity, but left it to men to divide the labor into the work of the priest and the physician, it should be necessary for us to have an insight into the object of our ministry, that is to say, man himself.

MAN—BODY AND SOUL

Man is a dualistic unit; he is one being, but that one being is a composite of two utterly different principles. Every living being has its nature from the principle of life within it. We speak of man as a being composed of body and soul. With great profit to ourselves we might delve beneath these trite words to a fuller comprehension of what they mean. Man has a body which he shares with the animals. Biologically that body differs variously from other bodies as in the animal kingdom but it conforms to every physical process of the animals and is subject to every physical and biological law that governs the rest of sentient matter.

This specific difference is derived from his soul. Some modern thinkers like to get away from the word soul because they say it has too much of a theological connotation. They may get away from the word but they cannot get away from the fact, and the fact is that regardless of what



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we call it, there is in man a principle of life specifically higher than that of the brute creation and that principle is a spirit. We know that it is a spirit because of its immaterial manifestations, its power of abstract thought, its power of reasoning, and the spiritual power of reflecting upon itself and thus becoming aware of its own abiding spiritual personality. St. Paul, quoting the Psalmist says: "Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels." (Heb. II, 7). He is a little lower because he is a spirit fashioned to be substantially united to a physical organism.

PRIEST AND PHYSICIAN

This correct understanding of human nature bears within it certain aspects of profound import to both priest and physician. The ancient Romans spoke of a sound mind in a healthy body. The philosophers of the Schools, or mediaeval scholasticism elaborated this same thought and reduced it to philosophical principles still valid today as regards to the intimate dependence of either the physical upon the spiritual or the spiritual upon the physical in man. It remained, however, for modern science to give detailed scientific support to these principles. I might cite to you the present advanced knowledge of endocrinology; the delicate balance of chemical and physical secretions that must be maintained to prevent both physical and spiritual havoc in the individual. The important philosophic aspect of our modern knowledge refers to this fact that it is precisely through this body that the spirit or soul of man functions. If we can understand this truth we shall be able to understand something more of the nobility of the practice of medicine. To sum it up we might say that the body is the instrument of the soul, that without a healthy body the soul cannot function, and if the body is pathological, the soul is impeded in its functioning.

In view of this it becomes increasingly clear to us why Christ was also a healer of the ills of men. When the disciples of St. John the Baptist came to Christ to ask if He were the Messiah, it is significant that in His answer He did not first say to them that the poor have the gospel preached to them, but that they were to go back and relate that; "The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead rise again," and only then did He make mention of the preaching of the gospel. (Matt. XI, 5). After preaching in the synagogue He went to the house of Peter and cured Peter's mother-in-law of what the gospel calls a "great fever". The multitude brought all their sick to Him, and so we read in St. Luke's account, that "when the sun went down, all they that had any sick with divers diseases, brought them to Him. But He laying His hands on every one of them, healed them." (Luke, IV, 40).

It is not necessary for me to detail the history of the vast number of cures wrought by Christ for who among us is not familiar with the

stories of the curing of the withered hand of the man sick with the palsy, of the many lepers, of the woman suffering for twelve years with an issue of blood who was healed by touching the hem of His garment, of the Centurion's son who was cured of a fever even though he was far distant from Christ, of the blind who received their sight, and of the deaf, their hearing. Aye, even the dead were restored to life. That part of the gospel dealing with the public life of Christ is interspersed throughout with the recitation of His compassion upon the physical sufferings of men and the exercise of His divine power to alleviate sorrow and pain.

We would fail entirely to grasp the significance of these miracles if we should lose sight of their ethical import. Christ the Son of God could never have debased His divine power by working a miracle for the vain glorious purpose of astounding the crowd by a display of supernatural power. His miracles were wrought for the sober purpose of confirming the doctrines He preached. They were wrought to establish in the minds of His hearers an undeniable evidence of His credibility. However, in the case of those miracles that had to do with healing there was certainly present a second motive. Would it be possible for us to believe that anyone who was the recipient of Christ's healing ministrations would not be from thence forth on His ardent disciple? There is only one instance in the Scriptures, that of the healing of the ten lepers at once, in which it is noted that nine failed to return to give thanks to God. This is the one conspicuous exception. Christ healed their bodies, and with that healing their souls became the tabernacles of His grace.

MEDICINE AS A PROFESSION

If we were to look upon the medical profession from a purely secular view-point, there would be every reason to venerate that profession because of its natural dignity. It is a profession. A man may have a job, or in a higher sphere of activity, a position. In either case the benefit of what he does, accrues to himself personally. A profession is set apart and distinguished from other walks in life by the fact that it is essentially altruistic; it functions through acts done in the service, not of the individual who does them but in the interest of humanity in general. There is self-sacrifice and unselfishness in the very notion of a profession. The reaction of the public mind to the recognition of this fact is an evidence in its behalf. We may admire a skilled worker, we may be awed by a great executive, but we honor even the least of those who serve in a profession.

THE PHYSICIAN—ANOTHER CHRIST

Now if the world accords to a profession such a dignity, how much more must the dignity of the healing profession be enhanced in the light of what I have said about Christ, the Divine Healer? It should be clear

in your minds that as physicians, inspired with the high ideals of Christianity, you are not going forth among men merely to diagnose their ills and to dispense medicaments on the materialistic level of biological and physical laws, but you are going forth among men to continue among them the merciful healing ministrations of Christ. In your own limited and human way, and to the best of the talent that lies within you, your life is to be modelled after that of the divine pattern given us by Christ whose mission you will be carrying to the rich and the poor, to the stranger and the friend, to those in high places and to those in lowly station. Suffering knows no boundary of race or creed or color or position in life; suffering is common to humanity, that humanity to which you are going forth, in Christ-like fashion, to help to heal.

In my opening words, I spoke of the identification in Christ of the physical and spiritual healing power. I mentioned that in leaving these powers to men He effected a division of labor. May I call your further attention, however, to the fact that in dividing these labors He did not separate them. As a consequence the work of the physician and of the priest are but two phases of the same thing; in their functioning they overlap, and they share a common ideal in Christ. Any physician of experience will be able to tell you that ever so often after the administrations of the priest have set the soul in order and at peace with God, health has returned to a patient far more quickly than medicine could bring it. Similarly what priest does not know how suffering and sickness can be turned to spiritual ends, and that ever so often, the physician's work of healing a broken body contributes to a renewal of fervor and grace in a grateful patient.

As the priest is to the soul, so is the physician to the instrument of the soul, the body. When, therefore, a physician relieves suffering or restores health to a body, is he not actually participating in the very priesthood of Christ by providing the physical basis for grace to function the better? There is the sacramental priesthood of the ordained priest, but besides this there is the other priesthood of Christlike professional ministrations. The idea of a priest is that he is one who offers sacrifice. When the physician devotes himself conscientiously to his work and to the ideals of his profession, he must of necessity be a man who offers sacrifice, the sacrifice of himself for an ideal. A sacrifice is offered for one's self and for others. Does not the physician offer himself for the good of many and in doing so does he not bring to them a renewed hope, a renewed life, a renewed opportunity for spiritual advancement? In his kindly and devoted ministrations does he not inspire those with whom he comes into contact with a renewed faith in both man and God? Surely then, while he is not sacramentally a priest through ordination, in the wider sense through his ministration, he does participate in the priesthood of Christ.

THE DANGERS TO A NOBLE PROFESSION

At this point may I utter just a word of warning. In view of the very nobility of your profession, its degradation becomes all the more abominable. We know that unfortunately there are materialistically minded physicians, too preoccupied with the material laws of nature to know that there are spiritual laws superior to all matter. They believe that because science can do a thing, it is right to do it. Such men recognize no moral law as being above biological or physical law. There also arise perplexing problems to which medical science claims to have a solution. Such a solution may be sanctioned even by laws of the State. Yet that very solution may constitute a degradation of medicine's service to man. There is another law above the law of either science or the State and that law is the immutable law of God that cannot be transgressed with impunity. "What doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his own soul?" (Matt. XVI, 26) are words of solemn warning uttered by Christ Himself. We might paraphrase these words by asking: What doth it profit a physician who can bring glory to himself by brilliant scientific achievement, if he does so at the price of staining his hands with human blood and burdening his soul with relentless remorse? There are some who cannot see the Catholic position on certain medico-moral problems. Yet that position is founded upon sound logical reason. It is our firm conviction that such men do not want to see the Catholic position but are carried away by the shibboleth that because medicine can do it, therefore it is right. It is our fervent and most sincere prayer that no physician here, going forth to participate in the healing mission of Christ, may ever lower or sully that great ideal by violating the moral laws of this same Christ. On the contrary, by your adherence to moral principles you shall widen the scope of your mission and bring the truth to those who are burdened by the yoke of ignorance and evil.

MY FAREWELL

Your whole training in this institution has been to the end that you be not mere practitioners of medicine, but that you be physicians in the sense which I defined as your noble profession. You have studied in this Jesuit University. Let the Jesuits be your guides. It was they who explored this land and the great river adjacent to this city in order that the light of the gospel might shine in the darkness of what was then a pagan wilderness. Not content to confine themselves to only one phase of activity, as missionaries, they have also pioneered in the advancement of knowledge. Surely in the course of the years that you have spent in this renowned center of learning and scholarship you may have many times been reminded of the ideals of zeal and of moral courage and deterioration, which I have now briefly recalled to your attention.

With this background you are going forth into the world. In the fore-knowledge of God alone is hidden the great future of each one of you. You will be amazed yourselves to find the confidences that people will put in you; the trust they will have in you; the secrets they will confide in you because they know that in a worthy physician these things are inviolable. As the years go on there will be many who will look to you as the one who gave them life again and strength and courage and hope and perhaps even faith itself. How many a sorrowing, suffering, broken body, physically wrecked and all but despairing will be restored and made anew by you still remains a secret of the unrevealed future that lies ahead; but we may be sure that the sum of such ministrations, could we but calculate them now, would leave us dazed in wonderment, and struck with a sense of fear for the great responsibility that shall be yours.

Go forth then, my good men, armed with the courage of your Christian faith, with the highest ideals permeating your upright minds, with a devotion to the great healing mission of Christ burning in your hearts. May the benediction of the Most High God be on that hand of yours that you will lay on fevered brow or pain wracked body. Yours is a noble profession, to cleanse and to heal, to comfort and assuage. But it is greatest of all, if you follow in the footsteps of Him Who said: "Be thou clean," "Receive thy sight," "Be thou made whole," "Take up thy bed and walk". Amen.

