

The Linacre Quarterly

Volume 15 | Number 2

Article 3

April 1948

British Medical Association Congress: Sermon Given to the Catholic Delegates by His Eminence Cardinal Griffin at the Catholic Church, Cambridge, July 1, 1948

Bernard W. Griffin

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

Recommended Citation

Griffin, Bernard W. (1948) "British Medical Association Congress: Sermon Given to the Catholic Delegates by His Eminence Cardinal Griffin at the Catholic Church, Cambridge, July 1, 1948," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 15: No. 2, Article 3.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol15/iss2/3>

BRITISH MEDICAL ASSOCIATION CONGRESS

SERMON GIVEN TO THE CATHOLIC DELEGATES BY HIS EMINENCE

CARDINAL GRIFFIN AT THE CATHOLIC CHURCH,

CAMBRIDGE, JULY 1, 1948

"For I was hungry, and you gave me food, thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was a stranger, and you brought me home, naked, and you clothed me, sick, and you cared for me, a prisoner, and you came to me. Whereupon the just will answer, Lord when was it that we saw thee hungry, and fed thee, or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When was it that we saw thee a stranger, and brought thee home, or naked, and clothed thee? When was it that we saw thee sick or in prison and came to thee? And the King will answer them, Believe me, when you did it to one of the least of my brethren here, you did it to me." (Matt. Ch. 25, v. 335-40.)

The high esteem in which doctors are held among the general public has been due to the special work doctors have undertaken in the service of others. The future of medicine in this country will depend on whether doctors are going to consider the medical profession as a trade or as a vocation. In other words, whether medicine is to be practiced mainly for commercial ends or for the service of others. A man trades for the sake of personal material gain; a man follows a vocation for the service of others. It is this aspect of medicine which has given the doctor his place in the world. A doctor has been regarded as one apart, in whose hands men have to place the important matter of their bodily wellbeing; in whose safe keeping they are prepared to place themselves when it is a matter of life and death. Man never places himself so unreservedly in the hands of another as when a patient submits to an operation. Men and women do this with complete confidence because they know that the doctor, by taking the hippocratic oath, has bound himself to observe the unchangeable moral principles of medical practice.

I should like to stress this point today because I see from the papers that this conference has discussed whether doctors should form themselves into a trade union or not. You will gather from what I have said that the use of the term "trade union," as applied to the medical profession, may easily create a wrong impression. If you want to appreciate the true value of your calling you should apply to yourselves the words of our Blessed Lord: "For I was sick and you cared for me Believe me, when you did it to one of the leasts of my brethren here, you did it to me." In other words, our Lord looks upon the medical profession as a true voca-

tion of serving others. He will consider this service you give to others as service done personally to Him. If we can look upon the sick person as another Christ we shall everywhere and always give of our best.

Priest and doctor have very much in common. We both deal with human beings. We are both concerned about their welfare, you mainly about their temporal wellbeing and priests mainly about their eternal wellbeing. We look after their spiritual life and you their temporal life. You are there at the beginning of life and so are we. You are present when men are sick and so are we. Very often both doctor and priest meet together at the sick bed and are with the patient when he is breathing his last. In many cases, and especially in those of mental illness, we need each other's help and cooperation. I always like to think that we are both moved by the same desire to help others who are in need of our help and that we are inspired with the same divine charity. In fact, without such high ideals it would be difficult to explain the devoted lives of so many doctors who have been martyrs of charity, always ready with their time and talents to be at the service of the sick. I have just heard of the reception given to Sir Alexander Fleming during his recent visit to Spain. As he walked through the streets of Madrid and Toledo the poor and humble in the crowds came forward and kissed his hands, testifying to the wonderful gift that he had given to the world by his discovery of penicillin.

We ought to consider each sick person as an individual with a body and soul, and a soul that is destined for eternal life. There is a danger, with specialization as it exists in medicine today, of a patient being considered merely as a case. Shall I say, as a heart, or a head, or a kidney, or an appendix, and not as an individual, with his own personality and his own family environment. Man is not merely a composition of flesh and blood, bone, fibre and tissue, but a human being capable of becoming a son of God and enjoying the vision of God through eternity. It is this aspect of man which is entirely overlooked by the evolutionists, who consider him merely as a rather weak specimen of the animal species.

The high standard of the medical profession has been founded on a belief in moral principles. There is danger that moral principles may, in the name of progress, be substituted by mere expediency. We are told that there is a conflict between science and religion, or to be more precise, between medicine and ethics or moral philosophy. Such conflict exists in the minds of those who misunderstand the functions of the one or of the other or of both. Science is that coherent, systematized knowledge which is based on observation and verified by experiment. Medicine, as a science, takes note of all that can come under the observation of man's senses and can be exactly recorded. Religion is the sum total of our knowledge of God and divine things, together with the duties which we owe to God as our Creator. Ethics tells us the principles on which we are to act towards God and our neighbor and how to direct our lives. Ethics tells

us which acts are good and which are evil and how to do good and avoid evil. Medicine enables you to deduce from symptoms, evident or otherwise, the nature of the disease. It helps you to make a correct diagnosis and it helps you to prescribe the remedy. But remember that you are dealing with man, composed of body and soul, who has definite rights and obligations, and whatever remedy you propose or apply must never conflict with those rights and obligations which are his.

So in prescribing a remedy you must act in accordance with what is in the best interests of the patient, always bearing in mind that he is a human being. Your function is to preserve health and life and never to destroy it.

These moral principles of which I have spoken are the laws that God Himself made when He created man. They were made in accordance with man's nature and may be likened to the instructions given by the maker of a machine when he hands over the completed article. One can, if one wishes, disobey the instructions, but in the case of the machine it will probably mean its final destruction, and in the case of man will be acting against his best interests.

There are many problems with which you will be faced. To illustrate what I mean, take the question of abortion. In many cases, in order to preserve the life of the mother, a doctor or surgeon will prescribe an abortion or an evacuation of the womb, and the result is the destruction of the life of the child. Ethics teaches that the child in the womb has an equal right to live as the mother and the best medical practice would prescribe a remedy which would save the life of both mother and child. Obviously, it would be easier to remove the foetus, destroy the infant life, but this would offend against the rights of the child and would moreover harm both medicine and research.

It has recently been suggested that doctors should cooperate in the practice of euthanasia and that incurable patients should be allowed the privilege of being exterminated. Do not be misled by sentimentalism. The sort of sentimentalism I mean is that which would recommend the abolition of the death penalty for murder, but at the same time would recommend the death penalty for an innocent, helpless human being. A doctor's duty is to save life and not to destroy it and if once it were recognized as part of his duty to inflict death, he would rightly deserve to lose any confidence that the public had ever placed in him. It is an inflexible rule of ethics and the moral law that no one has the right to take his own life, nor to allow others to take it for him. This rule was made by God. It is man's duty, and in these matters it is the duty of the doctor, to observe this rule and to see that it is not broken.

If you ever want to find out whether a principle is right or wrong, see where it leads to. Take, for instance, the question of euthanasia and also

the sterilization of the unfit. When the Nazis substituted God's law by State worship, they prescribed both the one and the other. The world knows the horrible crimes committed by them against innocent victims, both in hospitals and in concentration camps. The State has no right whatever to legalize voluntary euthanasia or voluntary sterilization because such practices are against the laws of God. You cannot do evil for a supposed good. The end does not justify the means and God's laws bind alike both the private citizen and those who are responsible for the government of a country.

So I urge you today to keep the high ideals of your medical vocation, a vocation to be of real service to others, and consequently, to the country. Your practice must be based on sound principles which will come from a knowledge of God and His laws and of the doctrines which Christ taught us. If you are to uphold the best traditions of medical practice in this country you must be both proficient in medicine and firm in your belief in God.

