

White Mass
For Catholic Doctors, Nurses and Medical Personnel
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception; Kansas City, Missouri
February 15, 2010

I

Gratitude for the Formation of a Catholic Medical Association Chapter

I am grateful to Bishop Robert Finn for hosting this Mass in the beautiful Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. This is the third time in a week that I have been here to concelebrate a Mass. I am afraid that Bishop Finn is going to start charging me rent. Bishop Finn and I are both overjoyed with the formation of a Guild of the Catholic Medical Association in the Kansas City Metropolitan area. I hope you appreciate how important we see this development as is signified by the presence of the four bishops of the two dioceses. Getting Bishop Finn, Archbishop Keleher, Bishop Boland and me at the same event is like the aligning of the Sun, the Moon, Mars and Venus. It does not happen very often! We are delighted by the desire of Catholic doctors, nurses and other medical professionals not only to live your Catholic faith with integrity both in your personal and professional lives, but also to support others who share this same desire.

II

National Debate on Health Care Reform

The formation of this chapter of the Catholic Medical Association in the Kansas City Metropolitan area coincided with our nation's almost singular concentration on the Health Care Reform. It has been a fascinating and at times frightening to watch the debate on Health Care Reform unfold over the past year.

Virtually, everyone admits that Health Care Reform is needed. Whatever the actual number there are too many people in the United States involuntarily uninsured. The cost of health care continues to spiral upward and continues to absorb a greater and greater percentage of our personal financial resources as well as a greater portion of our economy. The lack of portability of health insurance for some as well as the denial of health insurance for those who most need it because of pre-existing conditions are two of the major defects of our existing "system." These factors, as well as many others, point to a health care system that is not functioning efficiently and effectively.

Yet, all that notwithstanding, our recent national debate makes clear that the vast majority of Americans like the health care opportunities that are currently available to them. In many ways, health care in the United States is the envy of the world. Many people from other parts of the world come to our country to receive treatment. American scientific and medical research has improved medicines and medical treatment options available not only to citizens of the United States, but to so many others throughout the world.

III

The Importance of the Medical Profession

The Health Care Reform debate has made one thing clear, namely how important the medical profession is to all of us. What you have chosen to devote your professional life to responds to one of the greatest human needs. The proper care of our bodies is of crucial importance. Our physical health affects profoundly every other aspect of our lives. Being able to restore people to health through the proper application of medicines, surgery and other therapies is one of the noblest of human enterprises.

In His public ministry, there is nothing, other than teaching, to which Jesus devoted more time than healing the sick and suffering. He cured Peter's mother-in-law of a fever, perhaps she had one of the original strains of the swine flu. Jesus gave sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. He enabled the mute to speak and the lame to walk. Jesus responded to the plea of desperate parents whose children were seriously ill. He cured many from the most dreaded disease of His time, leprosy. Jesus even raised some from the dead: the daughter of Jairus, the son of the widow of Naim, and of course His own friend, Lazarus.

In a similar way, most here tonight spend your lives attempting to help the sick and suffering. Your wise administration of medicines helps to heal so many. You help individuals preserve and in some cases recover their sight or their hearing. Through surgeries, you enable the lame to walk. Through heart surgeries or neuro-surgeries you often extend the lives of your patients by decades. In emergency rooms, some of you are involved in quite literally resuscitating individuals who are clinically dead.

IV

Loss of Faith: An Occupational Hazard

In our educational system, there is perhaps no more rigorous academic program that is required of students than the preparation required to serve as a doctor or nurse. This, too, reflects the high priority and importance our society places upon the medical profession. What you do is so important for all of us.

Sadly, for some, this intensive education in medicine and science has caused them to lose faith. It is a temptation, an occupational hazard, to become so enamored with the capacity of scientific knowledge and with one's own capabilities, to mistakenly conclude God is no longer necessary. I am sure you know individuals in the medical profession for whom this is the case.

V

Fearfully, Wonderfully Made

Yet, if one's heart and mind are open to it, the study and practice of medicine leads to a deeper reverence and awe for God and His creation. Many years ago, I read a beautiful book entitled: *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*. The title is taken from a phrase found in Psalm 139 where the Psalmist describes in utero human development as God knitting us together in our mother's womb. The book is co-authored by a medical doctor, Paul Brand and a professional writer, Philip Yancey.

Dr. Paul Brand is the son of Protestant missionaries, spending many of his young years in the missions of India. The book is a beautiful reflection on the amazing nature of the human body. For Dr. Brand, his study of medicine deepened his faith. He marvels at how the unique, complex functions of each cell in the body work in harmony enabling us to do so many amazing tasks and functions.

On the opening page of the book there is found a beautiful quote from St. Augustine: “**Men go abroad to wonder at the height of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motion of the stars; and they pass by themselves without wondering.**”

In the chapter on the human frame, Dr. Brand marvels at how our bones are perfectly suited by their lightness to allow us mobility, but with the incredible strength to protect and support the weight of all of our cells. He cites a 100 year old study by an engineer that concluded “... **the arrangement of the bone cells forms the lightest structure, made of the least material, to support the body’s weight.**” Dr. Brand contends that no researcher yet has discovered a material better suited than the bone for the human body’s need. Yet, even if someone could come up with a comparable material, would it have the capacity, if it is broken to begin to heal and repair itself?

Hopefully, in your work in caring for the human body, even when they are not at their best – diseased, aged and/or sometimes broken, you are often struck with wonder and awe at the incredible ingenuity found in the human design. Is not the human body, truly fearfully, wonderfully made?

VI

Minister of Miracles

Our readings tonight are taken from those suggested for the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes. I have never been to Lourdes, but some day I hope to go there. Since Mary’s appearance more than 150 years ago, it has been a place where her Son continues His healing ministry even to this day.

A few years ago, I did have the opportunity to visit St. Joseph’s Shrine in Montreal and the Shrine of St. Anne located between Montreal and Quebec City. In both churches, there are walls adorn with crutches of individuals who were healed there by God’s mercy.

It is a marvelous occurrence when God intervenes and heals an individual in a way for which there is no medical explanation. However, it is no less marvelous when the Lord uses the human instrument of a doctor to effect his healing by an accurate diagnosis of the cause of the disease and recommends the appropriate treatment or performs the necessary surgery to bring about healing. Hopefully, you pause often during your busy work day to marvel at the amazing way that the Lord uses you to minister His compassionate and healing love to His people – to be His minister of miracles.

VII

Do Whatever He Tells You

In tonight's Gospel, we heard the first miracle of Jesus as recorded in St. John's Gospel. Interestingly, it is one of the few miracles that does not involve a physical healing. Jesus intervenes in what many ways seems a much more trivial matter, the lack of a sufficient amount of wine at a wedding feast.

What is even more amazing is that it was a miracle that Jesus did not intend to perform! It is Mary who notices the embarrassing circumstance for the newly married couple and who asks Jesus to help. Even more amazingly, Jesus appears at first not inclined to do what Mary has asked of Him. Yet, Mary seems to have no doubt about the outcome as she instructs the stewards with some of the most important words in all of scripture: "**Do Whatever He tells you.**"

I often suspected that the stewards must have sampled the water changed into wine before they brought it to the headwaiter. I cannot imagine them having enough faith to ask the headwaiter to taste what they had every reason to believe was just water.

As doctors and medical professionals, your role is not unlike the stewards of the Gospel. Essentially, you are called to strive in your professional and personal life to do whatever the Son of Mary tells you. Somehow, you heard Jesus instruct you to study the science and art of medicine. It was a more difficult task than the physical effort of the stewards in filling those six 30 gallon water jars. Your diligent study of medicine is just as important for Jesus to effect the miracles He desires to perform for your patients through you, as it was for the stewards to haul the water to fill those huge jars at Cana.

Sometimes, perhaps often times, in your practice of medicine you are not certain what is best for your patients. Hopefully, these challenges are moments that drive you to pray for the Lord to guide your decisions. I pray the Lord gives you peace and serenity in the important choices you make in caring for others, confident that the One who could change water into wine will use your knowledge, skill and experience to minister His compassionate love to your patients.

Part of what the Lord is telling you to do today is to be witnesses of the truth to your profession by holding yourself to the highest ethical standards and by listening carefully to the voice of the Lord in His Church providing instruction on the difficult medical-moral issues of our day. You are being asked to have a faith greater than that required of the stewards approaching the headwaiter as you stand against often the seemingly powerful established medical culture: 1) in affirming the sanctity of human life both in its earliest stages and its final earthly days, 2) in upholding a medical ethics that respects the dignity of the human person over research objectives, 3) in seeking the best care of the patient over cost efficiencies, 4) in giving some of your precious time, treasure and talent in serving those in need, 5) in refusing to do what may be scientifically possible, but is morally not permissible.

The Lord is calling you, asking you, instructing you to be heralds of the Gospel in your profession. You are being called to be part of what the late Pope John Paul II termed the *New Evangelization* as you help to transform the medical culture with the values of the Gospel of Life.

VIII

Transformed By the Eucharist

As we come forward to receive the Eucharist tonight, let us allow ourselves to be fully aware of whom we are receiving – the One Born in Bethlehem, the One who changed water into wine at Cana of Galilee, the One who healed so many in the Gospel, the One who gave His life on Calvary and the One who vanquished death on Easter. In a few moments Jesus will use very weak, frail instruments to speak His words of transformation over what is now just bread and wine making them into His Body and His Precious Blood.

Jesus in this Blessed Sacrament comes to us tonight as a food and drink unlike any other. A food and drink not absorbed and changed into our body, but a food and drink that changes us anew into the living Body of Christ. Jesus comes to you tonight so that you can bring Him and His healing love to others.

Praise Be Jesus Christ, now and forever. Amen