Letter to the editor

Challenged, yet filled with hope: Reflections from the CMA medical student boot camp

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From June 18th to the 23rd of 2013, the Catholic Medical Association hosted its very first “Medical Student Bioethics Boot Camp” at the St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Philadelphia. It was there, in the company of about 30 other medical students from across the country, that I received my first real training in Catholic biomedical ethics, and was challenged to re-evaluate what I believed about the role of the Catholic physician in today’s highly secular healthcare fields.

When I started medical school in the summer of 2012, I would have been able to say with certainty that serving others through medicine was a true vocation for me – in fact, the confidence and strength that I drew from that belief was what really got me through the first few months of medical school. However, when I found myself sitting two rows away from Father Billy as he spoke about “The Call of Jesus,” in the opening lecture of the boot camp, I realized that I had somehow lost my assurance in my own “call” amidst the research, clinical obligations, and cardiac drugs which also vied for my time and allegiance.

In that moment, the idea of my life in medicine being a vocation – of being a

Catholic first, and a physician second – was being thrown back in my face. Yet, compared to those first few months of medical school, I was now a little less naïve about the true nature of the field of medicine, the rigors of a physician’s life, and how our healthcare system really operates. I found myself thinking, “Can *I* face the culture which is ahead of me and still hold fast to my faith? Do I trust God and His grace enough to believe that I can live out this career (*or vocation*) in a way that is pleasing to Him? Do I really believe that I can be fully present to the suffering of others for the rest of my life and still remain hopeful and passionate about ‘the culture of life’?”

These questions plagued my prayer that first night, and I eventually came to terms with the fact that I was actually *fearful*. It seemed, in that moment, that being a truly Catholic physician involved an incredible amount of sacrifice. I anticipated the time (which already seemed in short supply) that I would have to devote toward educating myself on the scientific and moral literature defending Catholic medical principles. My pride recoiled from the fact that taking a strong, counter-cultural stance on birth control and

sterilization may cost me the respect of some of my colleagues. I worried that I might have to put aside any dreams of practicing within a large, academic, secular organization if I wanted the autonomy to be able to participate in medicine in a way that was morally acceptable to me.

Throughout the remainder of the boot camp, I tried to take in as much knowledge and wisdom as I could, yet I remained unsettled by everything I was experiencing. One minute, I was angry with how we as humans have chosen to treat the least of our brothers and sisters in our efforts to promote “quality of life” or “choice.” The next moment, I was rediscovering how thankful I was for the wisdom of the Church, and for all the saints who live out that wisdom in their daily lives. Ultimately, I was still confused and feeling very uncertain about how I was supposed to take everything I was learning back into the classroom and the clinic as a sophomore medical student.

Yet, returning to those environments was inevitable, and during the weeks that followed the boot camp, I took my questions, my lingering worries, and my renewed passion to old friends and

mentors, and to prayer. I cannot say exactly how it happened, but gradually, out of my unrest, the belief began to settle in my mind that the principle response to both my immediate emotional struggles and the anticipated challenges ahead needed to be hope. A hope that clings to the fact that God is not only calling each of us to serve Him in a particular way, but that He will also *provide the means* for living out such service. A hope that is born from the freedom to passionately seek the truth in all aspects of life, with the understanding that all truth is from God and leads to God. A hope that rests in the conviction that God *wants* us to be holy, He *can* make us holy through His grace, and He *will* (one way or another), because of His unwavering faithfulness and goodness.

Despite the challenges of living out a Christ-centered life within the medical field, my own spiritual journey, which was truly revived during the CMA boot camp, has led me into a greater appreciation for the fact that God would certainly not call us to a place where we would be unable to respond to His most important invitation – that of becoming a perfect son or daughter destined to be in communion with Him.