Spiritual Reflection

The encounter with the Living God is the foundation of Christian medical practice[†]

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GRATITUDE

Thank you for your participation in this annual celebration in which we pray for all who are involved with caring for the sick of our metropolitan community. The fact that we celebrate this White Mass each year, I hope communicates to you how what you do each day in service to your patients is valued by the Church.

JUBILEE OF MERCY

We are in the midst of this special Jubilee of Mercy. The Holy Father has asked the entire Church to focus on the living in a more intentional way the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy. One of the Corporal Works of Mercy is visiting and caring for the sick. Essentially the Corporal Works of Mercy come from the Parable of Jesus on the Final Judgment as recounted in twenty-fifth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel. Jesus Himself cites visiting the sick as one of the ways in which the righteous ministered to Him.

Pope Francis has also emphasized that in caring for those who are on the margins, on the peripheries, who are hurting and vulnerable, we do not just help the person for whom we care, but Our Lord reveals Himself to us through them. Those we seek to serve out of compassion actually give us a much greater gift if our eyes are open to recognize Jesus in the one we serve. Again in Matthew 25, Jesus Himself tells us that we are serving Him, encountering Him in the Corporal Works of Mercy, in caring for the sick.

HIGH IQ

If we took the average IQ in this church today (the homilist excepted), it would be well above the national average. The academic rigors of becoming a medical professional result in many of our most intellectually gifted individuals serving as doctors, nurses, pharmacists, therapists, etc.

Intelligence is a great gift, but it is a gift that also has to be developed and

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cultivated. Sadly, for some it can be a spiritual impediment. Sometimes, amongst doctors you find the so-called God Complex. We can become so enamored with our own knowledge that we forget the One who is the source of this gift. One can be so impressed with one's own intellectual ability we find it difficult to admit there is anything beyond what we see in the microscope or dissect in the lab.

On the other hand, for those with eyes to see and hearts that are open, scientific knowledge leads to a profound faith in the Creator. The more one understands our universe and world, and the miracle of the human body, the more one becomes in awe of the Creator. From the Catholic worldview, faith and reason are not competitors, but partners leading us to some objective truth.

ENCOUNTERING JESUS

Catholic healthcare professionals must be different from other medical providers. First, Catholic doctors, nurses, and healthcare administrators should be different because they have a different motivation.

Pope Emeritus Benedict said frequently that the core of what it means to be Catholic is not our doctrine and dogmas. It is not that he did not consider our Creed and Catechism important. After all, he had been the prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. His responsibility was to protect the integrity of Catholic teaching. However, important as doctrine and dogma are, they are not the essential foundation of our Catholic faith.

Pope Benedict also said that the essence of what it means to be Catholic is not living a moral or ethical life. Again, the Holy Father was not saying that living a virtuous life is unimportant, but it is not the core of what makes us Catholic.

Catholicism is first and foremost about an encounter with a person, the person of Jesus Christ. It is about a relationship with the Living God. Without this encounter, this relationship, we will not be able to understand our dogma and doctrine and we will not find the interior strength to live a virtuous life.

St. John Paul said the same thing in articulating the Church's vision for the Third Millennium. Pope John Paul said that it was not about new projects and programs, but it was about the Person of Jesus, knowing him—not just in an intellectual way, but encountering him in our heart. Pope Francis has articulated the same truth in *The Joy of the Gospel*, challenging all Catholics to open their hearts to encounter the Living Jesus.

JESUS THE MAN WHO LIVES

In the 1960s and '70s, Malcolm Muggeridge was a very well-known and popular British Broadcasting Company (BBC) reporter. Many American Catholics first became acquainted with Malcolm Muggeridge by his book, *Something Beautiful for God*, which made Mother Teresa of Calcutta an international celebrity.

Muggeridge, at the time he met Mother Teresa, was a self-declared agnostic who had been assigned the task of producing and narrating a documentary about a nun in Calcutta who had evidently caught someone in the BBC's attention. He was totally captivated by Mother Teresa and her amazing work with the poor. Many years later, in part because of her influence and example, Muggeridge became Catholic.

After his documentary about Mother Teresa, but before his eventual conversion, the BBC asked Muggeridge to do a multi-segment documentary on the life of Jesus.

Muggeridge took his crew to the Holy Land to film the sites where Jesus lived.

Logically, he decided to begin shooting in Bethlehem, where Muggeridge describes experiencing an illumination at the Church of the Nativity. He and his crew began filming in the fields outside of Bethlehem where they encountered a shepherd with a sheep draped over his shoulder like a picture on so many Christmas cards. The crew prepared to begin shooting when the shepherd threw down the sheep to haggle over his fee. After settling what Muggeridge calls this “unseemly transaction,” Muggeridge and his entourage proceeded to the Church of the Nativity.

He describes the difficulty of getting into the Church because of the press of those hawking postcards and rosaries and other souvenirs. Muggeridge was offended by the commercialism of this supposedly holy site.

Once inside, Muggeridge positioned himself on a ledge in the crypt that commemorates the actual location revered as the place of Jesus’ birth. Muggeridge sat in the shadows cast by the candles, which provided the only light in the area. He was not impressed by the way the crypt was adorned. He described it as tawdry and garish.

Muggeridge then noticed the people whom he described as “standard pursuers of happiness for whom the Church of the Nativity was just an item on a sightseeing tour.” He was disillusioned by all that he saw.

Then, Muggeridge began to notice the faces of the people that seemed somehow transfigured as they reflected on what happened at this very place. He observed how despite the rather chaotic surroundings, so many of the people began to be absorbed in what appeared to be very intense and sincere prayer. He realized they were not just visiting an historic place and recalling what had happened, they were actually entering into communion with the one born there.

It was from this experience that Muggeridge titled his documentary and

subsequent book, “Jesus the Man Who Lives.” He realized that Jesus was not just an historical person to be studied, but he was very much alive and animating the lives of his disciples (like Mother Teresa) some two thousand years later.

ONLY WITH KNOWING JESUS CAN WE BE HIS DISCIPLES

It is only by knowing Jesus—not knowing about Jesus as an historical figure, but knowing Jesus through an encounter of prayer, where we welcome Jesus into our heart—that we find the motivation and power to imitate His selfless love. It is from especially encountering Jesus in the Eucharist, recognizing the divine presence in the ordinary material of bread and wine, that we gain the vision to recognize Jesus in our spouses, our children, our families, and those we serve. It is only with this personal relationship with Jesus we find the capacity for a profound respect for the dignity of every human person, because we see in them, whether they are a patient or co-worker, one for whom Jesus gave His life on Calvary. With this vision, one is no longer content with just caring for patients with great competency and professionalism, but one’s professional life becomes a ministry where each person is recognized as made in the divine image.

It is only from this relationship with Our Lord that you will find the ability to embrace the moral teachings of the Church that impact profoundly the practice of medicine today. It is this appreciation of the innate dignity of the human person that will guide your professional care of the fetus, as well as the patient with severe dementia. It is from this relationship with Jesus that it becomes clear that just because scientifically we can do something does not mean we should do something.

WITNESS OF THE GOSPEL TO PATIENTS AND COLLEAGUES

Moreover, you will discover in your medical practice the opportunities to be a Missionary Disciple to your colleagues and patients. The call to be a Missionary Disciple, which Pope Francis has reminded us is a universal call to all the disciples of Jesus, is not a call to proselytize others, but rather a willingness to share with others the truth of what motivates, guides, and brings joy to our own life.

When St. Louis used to still have a football team, the Rams actually won the Super Bowl in the year 2000. There were many devout Christians who played on the team and freely witnessed to their faith.

I remember one player being interviewed, when the reporter claimed that some people were offended by the way players displayed their Christian faith. The reporter suggested that some fans felt the players were using their celebrity to impose their beliefs on others.

The player responded that he was sorry if some people were offended. It was not what he or his teammates intended. However, if you wanted to know what motivated him to excel on the playing field or what made him the kind of

husband or father he was or what moved him to be involved with various charities in the community, he could not explain himself without talking about Jesus Christ. Wow! What a powerful testimony this professional athlete gave about the power of his relationship with Jesus.

This should be true of every Catholic. We should not be able to explain ourselves—others can never really understand what makes us tick—if we cannot share with them our relationship with Jesus.

MARY THE FIRST DISCIPLE

As we celebrate this votive Mass of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Health of the Sick, aware of how many individuals she has interceded for with her Son for healing, we turn to her as the model for every disciple. She, who stayed faithfully at the foot of the cross, to share in her Son's suffering, we ask to help us to relieve the suffering, when possible, and accompany in suffering all those we are privileged to serve. May Mary, who draws others always to her Son, help us to live in such a way that we draw others to Jesus by the way we live our personal and professional lives. Amen.