On Being a Catholic Physician

The first person I saw die

CONOR M. McWADE

School of Medicine, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, USA

Today I was at Home—just like I was yesterday, just like I will be for eternity—on a hike with my friends. I rounded a blind corner in the path and, without looking up, stumbled into a woman coming the other direction. Startled, I looked up at her. She smiled and met my apology with her own. Her dark eyes and dark hair were pretty, and she had the strong features of someone from South Asia. I looked around and noticed my friends had suddenly slipped away. It was as if they knew I would not be joining them for a while.

I asked the woman her name, and she replied, “Daughter.” My face must have shown confusion. “God named me. My parents never gave me a name. What’s your name?”

I told her, adding a smirk. “It’s not as special as yours.”

Her smile widened, and she looked distinctly surprised. “I’ve been wanting to meet you since I came Home.”

I did not know how to respond. “Yeah? Well, here I am! When did you come Home?” I knew time has little meaning when you are at Home, but I asked anyway.

“When you were twenty-two years old,” she said. “You saw me die.”

I had seen plenty of people die in my career, but very few happened when I was that young. I tried to remember how old I was in medical school. She did not look familiar at all.

Thinking I might have seen her in a hospital somewhere, I asked, “Did I know at the time that you were a Believer?”

“No, my story is different—full of mystery that is astounding and appalling. You watched as I was thrown into a trash can a few months after I was conceived. I was the first person you ever saw aborted.” I noticed her eyes swelling with tears.

The first time I had witnessed abortions was in rural India. I spent a year in India helping prove the value of women in community development.

“Yours were the only eyes that watched me the whole way into the bucket full of needles and rags and bloody gauze. You watched me die in that bucket.”

I quickly tried to sort out my memories. The Indian government sponsored abortion and sterilization clinics several times a year at the hospital where I lived. There were always dozens and dozens of women who came. I remember them lying on cardboard or blankets side by side on the floor, just a step outside the operating theater. They would be given some sort of sedative, and it always took a few people to help them stand and move into the theater when it was their turn. I remembered standing next to several doctors—contracted by the government for this purpose—who seemed to command the room. It was systematic:

multiple medical teams working on two or three women at once, men in sandals carrying in the next woman in line, nurses prepping the next patient's body. I remember learning from one of the commanding doctors that it was difficult to be sure how advanced women were in their pregnancies. As was the norm for a student in the operating theater, I simply observed. Once or twice the doctors let me stick my eye up to the end of an umbilical port to see a colored band placed around a kinked fallopian tube. I never saw another device like it in my career. The steps all happened quickly and efficiently—a limp woman lifted onto the table, nurses quieting the groaning women, injections given, clorhexidine applied, ports placed, clips deployed, vacuums turned on and off, lots of gauze, constant manipulation of legs and pushing on the lower abdomen. I could not precisely remember anyone's face or any specific emotion in the room. For a government-funded program, this was the efficient, easy stage of the process. There was rarely a complication. The conveyor belt of steps took about five minutes per patient, and the women were then

returned to the line of half-asleep women outside the operating theater where the sedatives eventually wore off.

Daughter took a big breath and kept speaking. "It was the first time you saw a human die. There was nothing you could do. You were the only one in that room who believed I was a person with a soul. You knew God alone had 'knit me together in my mother's womb' and that 'all the days ordained for me were written in [God's] book.' You were the only one who ever prayed for me. God heard your prayer: that in a few short minutes I would be free to be with the King my Savior forever. Because of the Cross, pure darkness would not overcome my life. You pleaded this for my soul. I know it was difficult to wrap your head around. God's will doesn't always make sense in the moment, but He allowed your prayer to influence eternity. If only people understood their power to do such things. Thank you."

Swollen, mutual tears had spilled down our cheeks. I felt like I was told I could suddenly fly. I was soaring, but it was also terrifying and immense. She was so tangible. My memories of her death did not

measure up to this reality—a woman standing alive in front of me. I had prayed, but I did not realize the depth of what I was hoping for. Only God could take what was evil and create eternal good out of it.

“Thank you so much,” she repeated.

My mouth opened a few times to respond, but each time the thought was overwhelmed. Finally I said, “You would have done the same for me.” She nodded and wiped her cheeks. A few seconds of silence filled the air before I continued. “I don’t remember exactly what I prayed, but I remember being overwhelmed and sick to my stomach watching you and the others die.”

“I bet it was hard. I’ve never actually seen anyone die. Asia saw over twenty-five million abortions that year. Almost seventy thousand others were tossed in a trash can that day. When I came Home, it was obvious that everything God allows is eventually for His glory. He loves us so much that He gave us the freedom to make choices. To be sure, my burdened mother experienced remarkable pressures. I would have been her third daughter, and my father would have divorced her. Yet it was her free will to make such choices.”

I remembered grappling with this reality. “I was so furious at your mother. You had arms and legs. It was hard not to focus my rage against her. I knew it was

culturally complex, but I watched beforehand as the government social workers explained what was going to happen to the fetuses. I watched as your mother, along with the others, consented and accepted the sedatives. My anger was not the kind Jesus showed in the corrupted temple halls. I hated her in that moment.”

“I know how you felt even though I never had a chance to hate another human. I don’t hate my mother.”

“I know you don’t,” I replied. “That’s impossible here.”

“I do hate that she thought abortion was her best option. She had other choices. I hate that they were part of a system that ultimately destroys, not solves or heals. I hate that the world sanctions—no, promotes—this evil. But it doesn’t surprise me. Even in the womb, I wasn’t perfect either. Even there sin and separation corrupt us. Psalm 51:5 tells us it was ingrained in my makeup and soul.”

“When the doctor held out his hand and showed me your body, it became much more personal for me. The common logic of the day seemed so flawed. Saint Mother Teresa questioned how people could rally and march for world peace—peace between countries, communities, and families—and yet accept that we can throw unwanted people in the trash. It was shortsighted, a false quick fix. I remember associating that kind of abortion with violence for the first time. Violence towards all of us. Everyone loses, everyone suffers. Your mother left the hospital a few hours after the medicine wore off, and I thought about Isaiah 49:15: ‘Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on

the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.’”

Daughter smiled. “God fulfills His promises. Since coming Home, I have met countless women who had abortions on Earth. I love them so deeply. They’re so thankful there is no pain here. Their stories of abortion are full of the doubt and pain they suppressed on Earth, and so full of God’s redemption. There are no spiritual abortions. Abortions do not extract the souls of the unborn, and no one can be removed from the reach of God.”

“Daughter, people on Earth seem so uninterested in questioning and wrestling with abortion. So much of the individual processing happens behind closed doors. At the same time, most people seem uninterested in caring for those who have had abortions. I would know. For a long time, I was indignant toward them.”

“I know it. God help us. I pray every day for people on Earth to wake up to the reality of our souls. I pray for the women who have had abortions, that their struggle would draw them near to God instead of away.”

I nodded, moved by her compassion. “And my prayer is that people would realize that souls in Heaven are praying for them.”

Biographical Note

Conor McWade is a fourth-year medical student interested in emergency medicine. He has a master’s degree in Public Health and will pursue a career in global health.