On Being a Catholic Physician

Building a culture of life by embracing the feminine genius: A message to Catholic women in health care

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This article is written to encourage women working in various healthcare fields to understand their call and responsibility to help build a culture of life. By using their natural “feminine genius,” women are uniquely gifted to uphold the sacredness of sex and the dignity of human life in every clinical encounter.

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In our current age of moral relativism, sexual immorality seems to be the norm. Children are being exposed at increasingly younger ages to sexual content from video games, music, and social media. Even the leading experts in child health, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), encourage pediatricians to counsel adolescents regarding the efficacy of various methods of contraception during routine wellness visits. Although the AAP does recognize abstinence as the healthiest choice for adolescents, their 2014 policy statement “Contraception for Adolescents” provides extensive information on the major forms of hormonal methods of contraception rather than giving doctors the tools needed to educate families on the importance of protecting their children from the harmful consequences of early sexual activity. How should a Catholic healthcare provider respond to this situation? As always, we must speak the truth in love.

All of us in health care must play a role in restoring life in a culture of death, but who among us in health care is best equipped to carry out this important mission? The answer very well may be the Catholic women physicians and healthcare providers among us. Why? Pope Paul VI stated, at the close of the Second Vatican Council, “The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women imbued with a spirit of the gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling” (Paul VI 1965). This message alludes to what Pope St. John Paul II describes as the “feminine genius” or the unique ways in which women are designed to bring life and love into the world (John

Paul II 1995, no. 10). The culture of death can only grow when women abandon the duties of their true calling.

Frequently, those of us in health care shy away from sharing with our patients the Catholic vision of sexuality. There are many reasons for this. We do not want to appear that we are judging our patients or imposing Catholic restrictions on people who have other beliefs. We may not fully understand why the Church teaches what she teaches about sex, and therefore we cannot give what we do not have. We may fear criticism from our employers and peers when they learn about our views that are so very countercultural. We might not realize that truths of faith and science actually uphold one another and that when a medical treatment is immoral, there is often research to show that the same treatment is harmful to our patients and should be rejected as standard of care. For example, in 2005, the World Health Organization classified the artificial hormones contained in oral contraceptives as Group 1 carcinogens (WHO 2007). These drugs have been shown to increase the risk of breast, liver, and cervical cancer. Some of us, once we have fully converted to the truths of the faith, may even change our area of specialty in order to avoid being confronted with the uncomfortable conversations with our patients that may result. We must not shy away from these opportunities to share the truth with our patients. Dr. Greg Popcak recently noted, “The single most overlooked point in communicating the importance of the Church’s view on sex in marriage is that sex stands at the center of the lay vocation. Attempting to practice a lay spirituality while ignoring sex is like living a zombie spirituality that divorces the body from the soul. If the Church is serious about the universal call to holiness, she has to get serious about proclaiming and helping people live the Catholic vision of sex and love” (Popcak 2017).

The Catholic vision of sex and love can be appreciated only in light of understanding the tremendous dignity that comes from the fact that each and every human is created in the image and likeness of God himself. Each of us was created for an eternal purpose. “God himself is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and he has destined us to share in that exchange” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2012, no. 221). Once we understand this, it follows that we must realize the sacredness of the act by which man and woman cooperate with God to bring new life into the world: sexual union, which therefore belongs only in the setting of marriage between a man and a woman, where new human life may properly flourish.

Once we allow this concept to travel from our heads to our hearts as Catholic health-care providers, it is much easier to receive each patient as a person to love rather than a problem to solve. When we encounter someone who has made sexual choices beneath their dignity, we need to have the words to encourage them and give them hope for a brighter future. Before we can encourage them to embrace chastity, we ourselves need to be convinced that it is possible.

I recently encountered a nineteen-year-old woman in my office who was the child of a teenage mom. Shortly after the patient reached puberty, her mother brought her to a clinic for contraception to protect her daughter from the same fate that she had met as a teenager. She received what the AAP calls the most effective type of contraception for adolescent women: long-acting, reversible contraception (LARC). During our visit, the patient told me that she had been sexually active with several partners and had been recently diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection. She shared with me her goals of one day being a wife and a mother. She was concerned

about her future fertility. I gently shared with her the truth that her current behavior was not in line with her long-term goals. I explained the concept of saving sex until marriage and how this improves the likelihood of having a successful relationship and family. She joyfully received this advice and exclaimed, “I have never heard this before.” There was a glimmer of hope in her eyes as she left the exam room. Meanwhile, not once did I say the words “God,” “Jesus,” or “Catholic”. Instead, I tried to allow Jesus to reach her through my words and through my gaze as I listened to her.

Our patients are depending on us to give them the truth in the exam room. As Catholics we are called to know the Truth, intimately, and then to share the Truth with those entrusted to our care. When we do not share what we know with others, we betray Christ himself. We must let our light shine and never be content to let the beauty of the truth be hidden or suppressed.

I often share with patients and their mothers the essence of this quote by Venerable Fulton Sheen: “When a man loves a woman, he has to become worthy of her. The higher her virtue, the more noble her character, the more devoted she is to truth, justice, goodness, the more a man has to aspire to be worthy of her. The history of civilization could actually be written in terms of its women.” (Sheen 1999, 61). Women need to know something regarding their purpose and dignity. Women healthcare providers are the best equipped to communicate this truth. When we share the truth with our patients, even when we do not speak in religious terms, it will point them toward God.

Catholic women healthcare providers are perfectly suited for this mission. By

nature, women are *receptive, maternal, and generous*. We are designed to receive and to nurture new life in its most vulnerable forms, both physically and spiritually. A woman is usually very adept at bringing comfort to those in her care, even if it costs her own life in the process. A beautiful example of this feminine expression of sacrificial love is often attributed to St. Teresa of Calcutta: “Sacrifice, to be real, must hurt, must empty us of ourselves.” Because of her capacity to receive another life into her very person, she is especially *sensitive* to the inner life of others. Women see persons before things and have intuition that alerts us when someone is not well.

As a result, to all Catholic women who are healthcare providers: Be not afraid to be who you are! You have been given everything necessary to fulfill your mission in the world. All that is needed is to learn the mission and then to listen for the inspirations of the Holy Spirit as did Mary, our Mother, who lived her feminine genius perfectly. She will be our Mother and model as we seek to imitate her “fiat” so as to cooperate with God in His mission to redeem the world!

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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