Becoming Light of the World*

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Good morning to everyone. Welcome to our Eucharistic celebration. I am grateful to the organizers for this chance to celebrate the Holy Mass together, and I am happy to be here in this convention. I am sure Jesus is also happy to be present in our convention too. I put as a theme for this Mass, in line with the Gospel reading we will hear (from Mt 5:13-16), “Becoming light of the world.” Jesus said, “You are the light of the world.” As doctors, we are called to be light, especially in the medical world, and we hope this convention can shed light on various aspects regarding neonatal care.

Light of Faith

Our faith can shed light on the various human problems of today including those of the medical world. Faith is not meant to remain abstract, or relevant just for one hour on Sundays in church, but also for Monday morning on the ward rounds. Pope Francis said faith “broadens the horizons of reason to shed greater light on the world which discloses itself to scientific investigation” (Francis 2013, no. 34). When you wake up in the morning, if there is light, you can safely navigate your way around obstacles such as a pair of shoes on your floor. Without the light, it is easier to be clumsy and to fall over that same pair of shoes. Things become easier when there is light. In operations, a frequent call of the operating surgeon is “light,” so he can see more clearly what he is doing.

If we want to act ethically, we need light, and we need to be enlightened. The Catholic reflection on medical and ethical issues can shed a great light on what we are called to do. Edward Furton, director of Publications at The National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia, stated, “No one out there has a moral tradition as highly sophisticated as that of the Catholic Church.” Later, I will give a talk on “Decision making in neonatal end-of-life scenarios

in low-income settings” (McTavish 2017). When I am asked how to intervene in the case of a dying person, I really want to give the best advice. I am very conscious of the responsibility in front of God to say the right thing, as any errors of judgment may have grave consequences. I am so grateful to the long standing and deep reflection of the Church in this area. If you want to analyze how to act in an end of life scenario, you could consult the Catholic tradition that has reflected on such dilemmas since the sixteenth century—so around five hundred years’ worth of thought. For example, the Dominican Francisco de Vitoria (1492–1546) wrote extensively on the topic.

When considering end-of-life issues, the light of faith helps us see more clearly. It is different to consider this life as the “be all and end all” or to see that when our earthly pilgrimage stops, “life” continues. A line from a song might express it thus, “Oh yeah, life goes on. Long after the thrill of livin’ is gone” (Mellencamp 1982). St. Therese Lisieux on her sickbed stated it this way, “I am not dying; I am entering life” (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1997, no. 1011). Keeping the end in sight, the vision of eternity, will reframe/recast/redimension—all the “re’s”—and enlighten our approach to end-of-life dilemmas.

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Loving Jesus with All Our Mind

In this, I would appeal to all doctors, especially those who are Catholic, to draw more on the rich tradition of ethical reflection that the Church has. The Church has something to say in many vital areas of modern medicine and especially those areas that are ethically contentious. I believe as doctors we are also being obedient to the command to love Jesus with “all your mind” (Mk 12:30). Our Lord needs the brains and intellect of Catholic doctors to search and seek for the truth in a growing number of ethically problematic areas such as in vitro fertilization, “three-parent” embryos, chimaeras, physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia, and so on. The Church has something to say and contribute in these areas. Is your intellect and voice available for that mission? Can you also say, “Here I am Lord, you have called me” (see 1 Sam 3:5)?

Jesus, Light of the World

The encounter with Christ definitively enlightens us. This is the encounter that makes our faith. The encounter is “make or break,” so to speak. Otherwise, our religion is just a set of precepts or as we say in Filipino “maraming bawal” (a list of forbidden things). Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI (2005) reminded us, “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (no. 1).

Perhaps I can share how an encounter with Christ gave my life a decisive direction. Before I entered religious life, I worked as a medical doctor for around six years. I had studied medicine at Cambridge University, England, and did my residency in general surgery. After I got my fellowship, I started to specialize in plastic surgery. That is why I am so handsome today. I loved reconstructive surgery. One day in my life, I was twenty-nine years old, the Lord asked me “Reconstruct my people.” I said “Lord, I am already doing that. I am a trainee in plastics and reconstruction!” Yet still the call persisted. Back at work, I had an experience that helped me understand what type of reconstruction the good Lord was calling me to. I was on call for Plastics and covering the emergency room. I was called down to see a twenty-six-year-old male who had slashed his wrist—he wanted to commit suicide. We operated for eight hours to repair all the tendons, nerves, and arteries. After the operation, I went to visit him. “The operation went well,” I said. He looked sad and started to cry. I asked him why he was crying and

reassured him that all had gone well. “You should be happy,” I said, “we fixed your hand.” He replied, “you fixed my hand but who is going to fix my life?”

So clear was the intervention of God in my life that when I explained my calling to an atheist colleague he said, “You have seen the light!” I understood the calling not only to give attention to the cut wrist but to dedicate my life to reconstruct the deeper wounds. To invest my life to rebuild the face of Christ in each person. To bring the light of Christ to the darkness and sadness of the world of today. This understanding of the call was made clearer in a moment of Eucharistic adoration. I was gazing at Jesus and telling him that I was giving my life to heal people. The gospel that day was John 14:6: “I am the life.” I said, “Lord, so many young people lack the desire to live, they lack life. If you are the life, why not give your life to those young people?” In the Blessed Sacrament, the Lord continued to look straight at me. It was as if he was saying, “James, I want to give my life to them! But I need to give it through your life!” I think this is the mission of all of us! To give *life* to the world of today. It is not just to do things but to give the life of God to the world of today. Do you want to be a *life-giver*? Lord, teach us how we can give life to the world of today! To share our life, your life, and share our faith and love for you to many.

Reflecting the Light

Each one of us is called to give light in the world of today, and this can properly be considered the mission of a Catholic doctor. As Pope Francis would say, it is not just that I *have* a mission but that I *am* a mission here on this earth. The light we are called to give does not originate from us. It is something we receive like the moon receiving all its light from the sun. We receive the light from the *Son* too. The encounter with Christ, the light of the world, allows us to shine more brightly.

St. Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, used the image of light coming from the face of Christ. Writing to the church of Corinth, St. Paul states, “All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed . . . For God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to bring to light the knowledge of the glory of God on the face of Jesus Christ” (see 2 Cor 3:18 and 4:6). The Word of God is also described as a light for our path and lamp for our feet (see Ps 119). It is great to see a busy doctor still making time for prayer, so that he or she can stay connected to the source. A former civil engineer turned priest in our

order shared to us about dream houses in Singapore. The house was bespeckled with fancy lights, dimming lights, security lights, and all; but none of them shone. They had forgotten to connect the house to the electricity line. The Lord reminds us that if we remain in him we will shine but cut off from him we remain in darkness (see Jn 15:4-5). When I hear inspiring stories of many doctors here in Manila, working in challenging conditions, but still persevering, I see you are being light. This is the confirmation of the proclamation of Jesus in our Gospel—"You are the light of the world." When I hear of doctors who spend their spare moments trying to raise much needed funds for their poor patients here in Manila, I see your light shining in the darkness. You are really being light in the world of medicine. Keep shining, "bright like a diamond, like diamonds in the sky!"

Keep the Spark Alive

Sometimes, it seems that darkness can overpower, but John the evangelist reminds us, "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out" (Jn 1:5). The challenges of the hospital can sometimes seem too much or too great. In low-income settings, there can be so many real lacks in terms of resources and medical equipment, and poor families often simply cannot afford the ideal treatments. The real challenge then is in the middle of difficulties and struggles to "keep alive the goal of the Kingdom of Heaven" (Francis 2017). The Catholic social doctrine teaches us that we will not entirely eliminate poverty but "the poor remain entrusted to us, and it is this responsibility upon which we shall be judged at the end of time" (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2006, no. 183). Let us ask for the grace to always keep the light of faith burning and never to allow the hardships and challenges to snuff out the spark of the Kingdom in us. In all we do, small or great, we are helping build up the Kingdom, one brick at a time.

I close with some quotes from the prayer of Archbishop Romero, actually written by Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw. "It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us" (Untener 1979). No

one dose of medicine cures all, no small act of compassion to a patient solves inadequate hospital structures, and no operation heals the whole world. The prayer continues, "We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest" (Untener 1979). One ray of light does not enlighten the whole world at once, but it is a start, a beginning, a chance for the light of Christ to break into the world. May we enjoy this convention together. May the Blessed Virgin Mary continue to guide and inspire us in our work of becoming light in the world of today.

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Biographical Note

James McTavish, FMVD, MD, is currently the branch responsible (provincial) of the Verbum Dei male missionaries in the Philippines.