Medicine: Vocation – Mission

Editorial

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In our era, the phenomena of degenerated moral values that collapse around us like a house of cards are not unusual.

I thought of writing about medicine as a “value” that we are called upon to serve in an attempt to resist the crumbling social values and ruins that surround us.

“Doctor, please help me!”

How many of us doctors have heard this cry coming from deep within the soul of a patient who looks right into our eyes to draw the courage to face his ordeal.

“Doctor, please think of my child! My wife! My mother! I beg you to do whatever you can! I will be grateful to you for life”

I would like to ask: have you ever thought of this doctor, in moments of peace, in times of happiness, during periods of good health? Have you ever given any thought to this doctor, of whom society requires not to exercise a profession, but a vocation that also assumes a social mission?

A vocation, why? A mission, how?

A long time ago, I met a priest who had undergone surgery; he had found himself in the operating room under local anesthesia and had therefore been awake and able to observe the operating room and watch the procedure the surgeon performed before proceeding with his operation.

As we are all aware, in order to approach the operating table and start an operation, the surgeon has to prepare himself. First of all, he needs to replace his outdoor clothes with clean scrubs, and thus adjust to the environment of the operating room. Before he starts the operation, he puts on a special cap and mask and washes his hands after which a nurse

dresses him in a sterilized surgical gown, ties it at the back so that he cannot be touched and puts his gloves on for him. Finally, when everything is ready, the surgeon approaches the surgical table in order to commence an open surgical procedure.

It is this procedure that the aforementioned priest had observed that led him to come up with the following comparison: “As I watched the surgeon performing his tasks of preparation,” he told me, “I realised that there are similarities to what I, as a priest, perform at the altar. According to ecclesiastic terminology, the priest proceeds in a similar way to prepare for participation in Mass. He comes to the church, enters the sanctuary, removes his lay clothes and puts on his special ceremonial gowns and his mitre. Having dressed himself festively, he then proceeds to the holy altar in order to perform the no longer blood-red sacrifice. As I watched you perform your ritual before the operation, I thought of the similarities between our two roles”.

When he told me this, I wondered whether a doctor’s profession could possibly be paralleled to that of a clergyman. Is not the medical profession, therefore, a vocation? It certainly is. And here arises the question. From where does the doctor claim the right to consider an operation a vocation in the service of God, and his work a mission and a service to the community?

A brief survey of the literature helped me justify this opinion, especially something I read in the Old Testament, Chapter 38 of the Sirach Wisdom.

- Honour the physician with the honour due him, according to your need of him, for the Lord created him.
- The skill of the physician lifts up his head, and in the presence of great men he is admired.
- And he gave skill to men that he might be glorified in his marvellous works.
- My son, when you are sick do not be negligent.
- Give up your faults and direct your hands aright.
- And give your physician his place, for the Lord created him.

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- Let him not leave you, for there is need of him.
- There is a time when success lies in the hands of physicians.

Hence, I would like to present you with the following question: How many of your patients that have been cured from an illness have said to you, “Thank you doctor. I am cured. Glory be to God”? In other words, through your work, by following a certain treatment, you provide the person with an opportunity to thank God.

And then the question arises, “Who, among all the scientists, might claim such a ‘divine’ recognition as the doctor who, in the likeness of a clergyman, has the privilege to honour the “Holy” through his therapeutic capability?”

Paracelsus claimed that “doctors originate from God”. He said that “part of the power that created the sky and the earth, the animals and the plants, can be found within doctors. We doctors are the deacons and servants of life. To examine and treat is an act of creation, even though medical creation (or, rather, re-creation) is a relative and not completely divine act, as the doctor is and will remain a human being”.

Furthermore, Hippocrates in his writings on decency explicitly mentions: «Ιητρός γὰρ φιλόσοφος ἰσόθεος», in other words “the physician is equal to a God”.

The physician – especially the surgeon – often holds life itself in his hands. He has the power to give a life or take it; he experiences the miracle of the continuation of life.

Let me give you a simple example. I would like to remind you of our colleagues, the cardiac surgeons, who by extracorporeal circulation stop the pulse of the heart, ensure mechanical respiration and circulation to their patients and then, with an electrical impulse, they bring them back to life, just like God who touches Adam on Michelangelo’s painting of “Genesis” in the Capella Sistina (Fig 1).

Fig. 1 “Genesis” of Michelangelo

And when Hippocrates claims that the physician is “equal to a God”, at the same time he also defines and specifies the context of his medical science, as well as his mission. He asks us to take an oath whereby we swear that “in purity and holiness we shall guard our life and our art”: “in purity”, which means immaculateness in life, and “in holiness”, which refers to the sacred relation to God as a condition for the purity of life.

And he continues in his writings on “decency”: “The doctor, like a god himself, finds strength in holiness, and takes care of all alike without discriminating between rich and poor. In the same way that death knocks on the door of the poorest man’s hut and the richest man’s castle, the doctor tries to turn death away from the former and the latter. He strives not to make money or stand to gain from his efforts, but to alleviate the pain of the sick and preserve them in good health. He even manages to find the opportune moment to secure financial assistance from his richer patients towards his poorer patients. That not being viable, he may even proceed to help a poorer patient himself out of his own personal finances”. And Hippocrates concludes, “every day and night of his life, a doctor studies his science and widens his knowledge of it dedicating soul, mind and body to the welfare of his patients; aiming to successfully handle both easy and difficult cases, use his experience safely, offer clear and accurate diagnoses and perform the duties of a true Physician correctly”.

Therefore, our whole life, with its pains and joys is a self-study and a self-development process; a study of human nature and of the medical science. We sacrifice this life of ours and commit ourselves to our science in order to experience its deeper essence and express it as a blessing through our vocation.

The ideal Physician, according to the Hippocratic Oath, enters the patient’s home and private world, with consistent respect for his privacy. He gets to know the patient’s soul and body, his weaknesses and hopes. The patient opens up his heart, shows his wound and describes his pain, which often he cannot comprehend or put into coherent words. He wants the doctor to quench his deep thirst for health, for life and for whatever lies beyond, the unapproachable, which he desires but sometimes does not dare speak of. The patient does not just ask for a painkiller! He asks for his health back; he asks for his previous life back. He desires “not to die”, and here lies the deeper meaning of our mission.

When he addresses us with the agonizing question, sometimes in words and others with just a glance

“Doctor, will I live?”, we are faced with the patient’s anguish in the face of the unknown, in the face of death! This is the moment when the physician’s presence can act beneficially for the patient who in his face sees a saviour. For that patient, the physician becomes a symbol of survival, a hope for life. His every move becomes of utmost significance and importance and he hangs on to his every word for dear life. In this unique, sacred moment, a careless phrase, a cold glance, an indifferent facial expression can undo the patient emotionally. On the other hand, a warm smile, a kind word, a caring glance, a warm gesture, can give him the strength, courage or even regenerate the will to live.

The patient’s agony, when he is desperately seeking for a sign of hope from the physician, is similar to the moment the pulse of the heart is heard through the manometer the physician places around the patient’s arm. When the manometer is completely loose, the physician can hear nothing in his ear; similarly, there is complete silence when it is exceedingly tight too. There is a transitional period between the two, when a certain sign is transmitted. This sign, the pulse of the heart, is a sign of life. It is this sign of life that the physician should show in the face of his patient’s agony, in order both to justify his science and accomplish his mission.

Some time ago I happened to find a book by a German surgeon, Hans Killian, entitled “Sub umbra Dei” (God Stands Behind Us). In it he writes, “In this book I shall narrate a series of events that have remained unforgettable for me throughout my years as a surgeon. When I use the term ‘behind us’ in the title of my book, I mean God stands behind all us surgeons, who, standing by the patient’s bed or by the surgical table, struggle all alone with the responsibility for our patient as sole company. We all hold our patient’s life in our hands. We all have a better understanding of the power of death than most of our fellow humans. We are aware of how futile our human efforts become when Death approaches – unstoppable and irreversible. Yet we also experience the wholehearted joy when, contrary to any logical reason and scientific explanation, the miracle of a cure occurs and life is restored to the patient. This is an experience that frequently renders us physicians both modest and happy. This is why behind every event and every incident in my narration,” Killian continues, “there is the face of God in the shadows. Most of the times, it is serious. However, it is always full of benevolence and sometimes it may even smile at our weaknesses and shortcomings”.

We are all aware of the fact that at the difficult moment of a threatening storm, the captain of a ship

makes the difficult decision of sacrificing valuable, vital parts of a ship’s cargo, in order to save living souls. Similarly, the surgeon may at times need to sacrifice a patient’s limb or organ in order to save the person and grant them the gift of life, which, as our earlier colleagues said when prescribing, is always done with the help of God, “Cum Deo”.

We have all chosen a profession that brings us to a dramatically privileged position. We meet people at the most difficult and sacred moment of their lives, in their agony “not to die”. In such moments of anguish, let us send them a message and offer an assertion: Medicine is for us a vocation; it is therefore our mission to palliate the agony and the pain of our fellow people.

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