

Address to the Italian Medical Biological Union “San Luca”

November 12, 1944

Pope Pius XII

Your presence, beloved sons, reminds Us of a scene that occurred in Paris in December 1804. In the Grand Hall of the Louvre, where a large number of delegations came to pay homage to the Vicar of Christ and to receive his blessing, five young physicians were presented to the Supreme Pontiff Pius VII, among them the famous Laënnec: they were members of the institution *Auxilium christianorum* [Help of Christians] that had been founded a few years earlier in that metropolis. The Pope could not conceal an initial reaction of surprise: “Oh!” he said, smiling, “*Medicus pius, res miranda!*” [“A God-fearing physician, what a marvel!”]

In the oppressive atmosphere of a materialistic intellectual formation, an association like your Italian Medical Biological Union “San Luca” helps to add something like a breath of fresh, clean air—above all by directing minds toward those fundamental truths of right reason and faith, in which the great questions of medical ethics find their solution; secondly, by affirming and applying Christian principles in the practice of medicine and in the education of young students.

I

The Major Principles Guiding the Activity of the Christian Physician

Quite unlike his colleagues in their elegant dress coats, who in the famous “Anatomy Lesson” by Rembrandt seem primarily concerned with having their features recorded for posterity, one of those figures attracts the viewer’s attention by

the liveliness and profundity of his facial expression. Intently, holding his breath, he plunges his gaze into the open incision, anxious to read the secret of those internal organs, eager to snatch from death the mysteries of life. Anatomy is already a wonderful science in its own field because of what it reveals; it has the further merit of introducing the mind to regions that are still more vast and sublime. The great Morgagni knew this well and sensed it strongly when, during a dissection, he let the surgical knife fall from his hands and exclaimed, “Ah, if only I could love God as I know Him!”

Whereas anatomy manifests the power of the Creator in the study of the matter of the marvelous organism, physiology probes its functions, and biology discovers there the laws of life, its conditions, requirements, and generous abundance. The providential arts of medicine and surgery apply all these sciences to the task of defending the human body, which is as fragile as it is perfect, repairing its losses and curing its infirmities. Furthermore, the physician, more than other scientists, intervenes everywhere with his heart no less than with his intelligence; he does not deal with inert matter, however precious; in his hands another human being, somebody like him, one of his brethren, is suffering. Furthermore, this patient is not an isolated creature; he is a person who has his position and his duties in his family, and his mission, however humble, in society. Still more, the Christian physician never loses sight of the fact that the sick or wounded person he is treating—who, thanks to his care, will continue for a longer or shorter time to live or else, despite his attentions, will die—is journeying toward an eternal life, and that the patient’s eternal happiness or unhappiness depends on his dispositions at the moment of his definitive passage.

Norms Concerning the Individual Human Being

Composed of matter and spirit, and himself an element in the universal order of beings, man is indeed directed in his journey here below toward a destination beyond time, toward an end which is above nature. From this interpenetration of matter and spirit in the perfect unity of the human composite, from this participation in the movement of all visible creation, it follows that the physician is often called to give advice, to make decisions, and to formulate principles which, although they are directly aimed at curing the body, its members and organs, nevertheless affect the soul and its faculties, the supernatural destiny of man and his social mission.

Now unless he always keeps in mind man’s composition, his position and function in the universal order of beings, his spiritual and supernatural destiny, the physician will easily run the risk of becoming entangled in more or less materialistic prejudices and of following them to their inevitable logical consequences: utilitarianism, hedonism, an absolute autonomy from the moral law.

A captain may very well be able to give precise instructions as to how to steer the ship or to set the sails; however, if he does not know the destination, or does not know how to find out from his instruments or from the stars that shine over his head the position and the route of his vessel, where will his foolish course lead him?

Yet this concept of being and final end opens the way to loftier considerations.

The complexity of this composite of matter and spirit, and also of this universal order, is such that man cannot direct himself toward the integral and unique end of

his being and of his personhood except by the harmonious action of his various corporeal and spiritual faculties, and he cannot maintain his position either by isolating himself from the rest of the world or by losing himself in it, as myriads of identical molecules are lost in an amorphous conglomeration. Now this real complexity and this necessary harmony present difficulties of their own to the physician and dictate his duty.

In designing man, God regulated each one of his functions and distributed them among the various organs. By that very fact He defined the distinction between those that are essential to life and those that affect only the integrity of the body (however precious that may be), its activity, its well-being, and its beauty. At the same time He fixed, prescribed, and limited the use of each one. Therefore, man cannot be permitted to arrange his life and the functions of his organs according to his liking, in a way contrary to the internal and immanent purposes that are assigned to them. Truly, man is not the owner, the absolute master, of his body, but only the steward. This leads to a series of principles and norms that regulate the use and the right to dispose of the organs and the members of the body and that apply both to the person affected and to the physician who is consulted so as to advise him.

Norms for the Resolution of Conflicts of Interest

The same rules, moreover, must guide the resolution of conflicts between divergent interests, according to the hierarchy of values, always keeping God's commandments. Therefore it will never be permissible to sacrifice eternal interests to temporal goods, even the most highly prized among them, just as it will not be at all licit to disregard the latter in favor of common whims and the demands of the passions. In such crises, which are sometimes tragic, the physician often finds himself the counselor and, as it were, the designated arbitrator.

Even when restricted and limited to the person himself, who is so complex in his unity, the inevitable conflicts between divergent interests give rise to rather delicate dilemmas. How much more difficult then are the problems that society causes when it asserts rights over the body, over its integrity, or over the very life of man! Now it is sometimes hard to determine their limits in theory; in practice the physician, no less than the single individual directly concerned, can find that he needs to examine and analyze such requirements or claims, to evaluate their morality and to gauge the extent to which they are ethically binding.

Society and the Individual and Their Different Legal Positions

Here likewise reason and faith draw the boundaries between the respective rights of society and the individual. No doubt man is by nature destined to live in society; yet, as even unaided reason teaches, in principle society is made for man, and not man for society. His right to his own body and his life comes, not from society, but from the Creator Himself, and he is responsible to the Creator for the use that he makes of it. It follows that society cannot directly deprive him of that right, unless he has made himself liable to such a privation by a serious and proportionate crime.

With regard to the body, the life and the bodily integrity of individual human beings, the juridical position of society is essentially different from that of the individuals themselves. While limited, man's power over his members and his organs is a direct power, because they are constitutive parts of his physical being. It is clear, in fact, that since their differentiation in a perfect unity has no other purpose than the good of the entire physical organism, each of these organs and members can be sacrificed if it places the whole in some danger that could not otherwise be averted. The case of society is quite different, because it is not a physical entity, with individual human beings as its parts, but rather a simple community of purpose and action; by that right it can demand from those who compose it and are called its members all the services necessarily required for the true common good.

These are the foundations on which we must base every judgment about the moral value of the acts and interventions on the human body or the life and integrity of the person that are permitted or imposed by the public authorities.

Pain and Death

The truths set forth thus far can be known by the light of reason alone. But there is a fundamental law that confronts the physician more than other persons, the full meaning and purpose of which can be made clear and manifested only by the light of revelation: We mean pain and death.

No doubt physical pain also has a natural and salutary function: it is a warning signal that reveals the onset and the often insidious development of a hidden ailment, and prompts and urges the person in pain to obtain a remedy. But the physician inevitably encounters pain and death in the course of his scientific investigations as a riddle for which his mind does not have the key, and in his professional practice as an inevitable and mysterious law before which his art often remains powerless and his compassion fruitless. He may well determine his diagnosis according to all the laboratory and clinical findings, formulate his prognosis according to all the requirements of science; but in the depths of his conscience, of his heart, as a man and a scientist, he senses that the explanation of that enigma stubbornly escapes him. He suffers from it; anguish seizes him inexorably, until he asks faith for an answer which, although not complete (for that is part of the mystery of God's designs and will be manifest in eternity), nevertheless is able to calm his mind.

Here is that answer. When God created man, He exempted him by a gift of grace from that natural law of every corporeal, sensate living thing and did not intend to include pain and death in his destiny; sin introduced them. But He, the Father of mercies, took these things into His hands, made them pass through the body, the veins, and the heart of His beloved Son, who like Him is God, yet was made man so as to be the Savior of the world. Thus pain and death became, for every human being who does not reject Christ, means of redemption and sanctification. Thus the path of the human race—the entire length of which unfolds beneath the sign of the Cross and under the law of pain and death, while it matures and purifies the soul here below—leads it to the boundless happiness of a life that has no end.

To suffer, to die: this is certainly, to use the daring expression of the Apostle of the Gentiles, the "foolishness of God," a folly that is wiser than all the wisdom

of men (see 1 Corinthians 1:21ff.). In the pale glimmer of his weak faith, the poor poet was able to sing,

*L'homme est un apprenti, la douleur est son maître,
Et nul ne se connaît tant qu'il n'a pas souffert.*
(Alfred de Musset, *La nuit d'octobre*)

Man is an apprentice, his master is pain,
And no one knows himself until he has suffered.
(“October Night”)

In the light of revelation the pious author of *The Imitation of Christ* was able to write the sublime twelfth chapter of his second book, “*De regia via sanctae Crucis*” [“The Royal Road: The Way of the Cross”], which is resplendent with the most marvelous understanding of life and the most sublime Christian wisdom.

Confronted, then, by the insistent problem of pain, how can the physician answer his own question? And what answer can he give to the unfortunate person whom sickness has reduced to a gloomy torpor, or who rises up in a futile rebellion against suffering and death? Only a heart imbued with a lively, deep faith will be able to find words of personal sincerity and conviction capable of making the patient accept the answer given by the divine Master Himself: it is necessary to suffer and die in order to enter into glory (see Luke 24:26, 46). He will fight with all the means and the expedients of his science and skill against sickness and death, not with the resignation of a desperate pessimism, nor with the “exasperated resolve” that one modern philosophy thinks it must exalt, but rather with the calm serenity of someone who sees and knows that pain and death are part of the salvific plan of the omniscient and infinitely good and merciful Lord.

Christian Medical Science

It is therefore obvious that the person of the physician, like all his activity, moves constantly within the ambit of the moral order and under the rule of its laws. In no statement, in no advice, in no measure taken, in no intervention can the physician feel that he is beyond the sphere of morality, unfettered and independent of the fundamental principles of ethics and religion; nor is there any act or word for which he is not responsible before God and in his own conscience. It is quite true that some reject, in theory and in practice, the concept of a Christian medical science as an absurdity and an illusion. In their view, there can be no such thing as Christian medicine, just as there is no Christian physics or chemistry, whether theoretical or applied: the domain of the exact and experimental sciences—they say—extends beyond the religious and ethical field, and therefore they know and recognize only their own immanent laws. A strange and unwarranted restriction of the visual field of the problem! Do they not see that the objects of those sciences are not isolated in a vacuum, but rather are part of the universal world of beings? That in the order of goods and values they have a definite place and degree; that they are constantly in contact with the objects of the other sciences, and in particular they are under the law of immanent and transcendent finality, which binds them into an ordered whole? We admit, however, that when we talk about a Christian orientation of science, we have in mind science not so much in itself as in its practitioners and scholars, in whom

it lives, moves, and is manifested. Physics and chemistry also, which conscientious scientists and professionals employ to the advantage and benefit of individuals and society, can become instead, in the hands of perverse men, agents and instruments of corruption and ruin. Therefore it is all the more clear that in medicine the supreme interest of truth and goodness is opposed to any claim to be objectively or subjectively free from the multifarious relations and ties that keep medical science within the general order.

II

Application of the Principles to Medical Practice and Teaching

But your union of Catholic physicians and biologists is valuable not only because the learned debates that arise and are examined within it, the scientific reports that it promotes, and the faithful adherence to the teaching of the Church professed by its members assure each one of them of a broader knowledge and a deeper understanding of the fundamental truths that define and govern the field of their studies and their activity. It also offers another advantage: that of facilitating in professional practice the resolution of particularly difficult cases in a way that conforms to the moral law.

It would be impossible in a short talk to enumerate and evaluate these individual cases. On the other hand, in Our exhortation last February to pastors and Lenten preachers in Rome, We already had the occasion to present a series of reflections on the Ten Commandments, from which We think that the Catholic physician too may draw some useful lessons for the practice of his profession.

The Commandment of Love

The greatest of all the commandments is love: love of God and, flowing from it, love of neighbor. True love, illumined by reason and faith, does not blind men, but makes them more clear-sighted; nor will the Catholic physician ever be able to find a better counselor than this true love, in giving his advice or in undertaking and carrying out the treatment of a patient: “*Dilige, et quod vis fac.*” “Love, and do as you will.” This saying of St. Augustine (*In I Johann.* VII.4.8 in Migne PL 35:2033), an incisive axiom that is often quoted impertinently, finds here its full, legitimate application. What a reward it will be for the conscientious physician to hear on the day of eternal retribution the grateful acknowledgment of the Lord: “I was sick and you visited me” (Matthew 25:36)! Such love is not weak; it does not favor an indulgent diagnosis; it is deaf to all the voices of the passions that would try to make it their accomplice; it is full of kindness, without envy, selfishness, or anger; it does not rejoice at wrong; it believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things: thus the Apostle of the Gentiles describes Christian charity in his marvelous hymn of love (see 1 Corinthians 13:4–7).

The Intangibility of Human Life

The Fifth Commandment, “You shall not kill” (Exodus 20:13), that synthesis of our duties regarding the life and integrity of the human body, is a rich source of teaching, both for the university instructor at his lectern and for the practicing physician. As long as a man is not guilty of a serious crime, his life is inviolable,

and hence any act directly tending to destroy it is illicit, whether such destruction is intended as an end in itself or only as a means to an end, whether the life in question is in the embryonic stage or is fully developed or has at last arrived at its finish. God alone is lord of the life of a human being who is not guilty of a crime punishable by the death penalty! The physician does not have the right to dispose of the infant's life or the mother's, and no one in the world, no private person, no human power can authorize him to destroy it directly. His duty is not to destroy lives but to save them. These are fundamental and unchangeable principles, which the Church over the last few decades has deemed necessary to proclaim repeatedly and with all clarity against opinions and methods that are opposed to them. In the resolutions and decrees of the Church's Magisterium, the Catholic physician finds in this regard a sure guide for his theoretical judgment and his practical conduct.

The Generation and Education of Offspring

Yet there is in the moral order a vast field that requires in a physician particular clarity in his principles and assurance in his actions: a field agitated by the mysterious energies instilled by God in the organism of the man and of the woman so as to give rise to new lives. It is a natural power, of which the Creator Himself determined the structure and the essential forms of activity, with a precise purpose and with corresponding duties, to which man is subject in every conscious use of that faculty. The primary purpose (to which the secondary ends are essentially subordinate) intended by nature in this use is the propagation of life and the education of offspring. Only matrimony, regulated by God Himself in its essence and in its properties, assures both ends in keeping with the good and the dignity of the children no less than of the parents. This is the one norm that illuminates and rules this whole delicate matter; one should refer to this norm in all concrete cases, in all special questions. Finally, the faithful observance of this norm guarantees in this regard the moral and physical health of individual persons and of society.

Fatal Transgressions of the Laws of Nature

It should not be difficult for the physician to understand this immanent finality that is deeply rooted in nature, so as to assert it and apply it with personal conviction in his scientific and practical activity. He will sometimes be more readily believed than the theologian himself, when he admonishes and warns that anyone who violates and transgresses the laws of nature will sooner or later have to suffer the fatal consequences for his personal worth and his physical and psychological integrity.

Here is a youth who, impelled by rising passions, has recourse to the physician; here are fiancés, who with a view to their impending wedding ask for his advice, who not uncommonly, alas, want something contrary to nature and decency; here is a married couple who look to him for light and assistance, or even more than that, for connivance, because they claim that they can find no other solution or way out of the conflicts of life except for a deliberate violation of the ties and the duties inherent in the use of marital relations. They will then try every possible argument and pretext (medical, eugenic, social, moral) to induce the physician to give advice or offer help that will allow the satisfaction of their natural instinct while depriving it of its potential to achieve the purpose of the generative power. How will he be

able to stand firm against all these assaults if he himself lacks the clear knowledge and personal conviction that the Creator Himself, for the good of the human race, tied the voluntary use of those natural energies to their immanent purpose by an indissoluble bond, which allows for no slackening or break?

The Obligation to Tell the Truth

The Eighth Commandment likewise has its place in medical ethics. According to the moral law, no one is allowed to lie; there are, however, cases in which the physician, while never saying anything positively false, cannot bluntly tell the whole truth, even if asked, especially when he knows that the patient would not have the strength to bear it. But there are other cases in which he no doubt has the duty to speak clearly—a duty to which every other medical or humanitarian consideration must yield. It is not permissible to lull the sick person or his relatives in an illusory security, with the danger of thus compromising the patient's eternal salvation or the fulfillment of obligations of justice or charity. It would be wrong to try to justify or excuse such conduct under the pretext that the physician is still expressing himself in the way that he thinks best suited to the personal interest of the patient, and that it is other people's fault if they take his words too literally.

The Professional Secret

Among the duties that result from the Eighth Commandment we should also include the keeping of professional secrets [i.e., patient–doctor confidentiality], which ought to serve and does serve not only the private interest but even more so the common advantage. In this area, too, conflicts can arise between the private good and the public good, or between the various elements and aspects of the same public good—conflicts in which it can become at times extremely difficult to measure and weigh fairly the reasons pro and con for speaking or remaining silent. In such perplexing circumstances, the conscientious physician looks to the fundamental principles of Christian ethics for the norms that will help him to set out on the right path. These norms, indeed, while they clearly affirm the obligation of the physician to keep a professional secret, above all in the interest of the common good, do not however assign an absolute value to confidentiality; in fact it would not be conducive to that same common good if a professional secret were to be placed in the service of crime or fraud.

The Scientific Training of the Physician and His Continuing Education

Finally, We would not want to omit saying a word about the physician's obligation not only to have a solid scientific education but also to continue constantly to develop and integrate his knowledge and professional skills. This is a moral duty in the strict sense, which binds in conscience before God, because it concerns an activity that closely affects the essential goods of the individual and of the community. It implies:

- for the student of medicine during the time of his university training, the obligation to apply himself seriously to his studies so as to acquire the requisite theoretical knowledge and the necessary practical ability in applying them.

- for the university professor, the duty to teach and to communicate both of these things to the students in the best possible way, and not to certify anyone as being professionally qualified without previously having made sure of it by a conscientious and in-depth examination. To act differently would be to commit a serious moral offense, because it would expose private and public health to serious dangers and incalculable harm.

- for the physician who is already practicing his profession, the obligation to keep informed about the development and progress of medical science, through the reading of scientific works and journals, participation in conferences and academic courses, conversation with colleagues and consultations with professors on the faculty of medicine. These ongoing postgraduate studies are an obligation for the practicing physician insofar as they are feasible for him and are required for the good of his patients and of the community.

It will be a great honor for your union to prove with deeds that its members not only do not fall behind their colleagues in scientific learning and professional skills but also distinguish themselves as first-rate professionals. It will thereby effectively help to inspire and reinforce confidence in the moral principles that it professes; and consequently it will see that those who want truly useful and wise advice, sound assistance, [and] conscientious care will regard a physician's membership in your association as a guarantee that their expectations will not be disappointed.

From the Gospel of Saint Luke

Luke, whom St. Paul called "the beloved physician" (Colossians 4:14) wrote in his Gospel, "Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any that were sick with various diseases brought them to [Jesus]; and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them" (4:40). Although he does not possess such prodigious power, the Catholic physician who lives up to the requirements of his profession and his faith will find all human miseries seeking refuge near him and asking that his beneficent hand be extended and laid upon them. And God will bless his knowledge and expertise, so that he can heal many and, where that is not granted to him, he can at least procure relief and comfort for the afflicted.

With the hope that in this way precious grace will be bestowed on you abundantly in your many-sided work, We cordially impart to all of you here present, to your families, to your loved ones, and to the sick who are entrusted to your care Our paternal Apostolic Blessing.

TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL J. MILLER