

Medicine and Morality

The Catholic Review

Earlier this month, what a privilege it was for me to concelebrate Mass with our Holy Father in Rome to mark the canonization of five new saints. Each of these became great because each became a servant, a slave of all in imitation of Christ who did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life for the ransom of all.

St. Jeanne Jugan was one of the five canonized that day. She founded the Little Sisters of the Poor, who now number more than 2800 in 30 countries, operating 30 houses for the elderly in the United States. This order of sisters—so preciously present right here in St. Martin's Home for the Aged in Catonsville—was begun by a humble, virtually anonymous young French woman whose rule of life was one which every Christian would do well to adopt: "Look on the poor with compassion and Jesus will look on you with kindness."

Another of the five was Father Damien of Molokai, known as the "leper priest," because of his life-long service to people inflicted with the condition that would come to be known as Hansen's disease. Thought to be incurable and highly contagious, at that time the scourge of leprosy was a most feared disease.

Typical of the attitudes of the 1880s was the saying, "Would it not be a great favor to be thrown prey to a wild beast rather than to be condemned to live in the poisonous atmosphere of a leper settlement?" The response offered by our new leper-priest saint? "I am happy and content, and if I were given the choice of leaving here in order to be cured, I would answer without hesitation: I'll remain here with my lepers as long as I live."

The attitudes of both St. Jeanne Jugan and Father Damien represent the generous instincts of so many in the medical profession today. Surely many of them have had experiences somewhat akin to those of Damien. Most persevere in such a challenging environment precisely because they are deeply rooted in the ethos of their call as medical professionals.

They, along with ever-conscientious believers, must surely be aware of that holy mystery that resides in the core of every human being, the mystery insisted upon from the first book of the Bible that we are all made in the image and likeness of God. Indeed, theirs is no less the gift of faith than was the faith which fueled the saintly heroism of Jeanne Jugan and Damien of Molokai.

How many of us today would hesitate to recognize as fully human—much less to embrace the likes of—those whom Damien valued as members of his family? It takes faith to do so!

Even worse than leprosy of the body, however, is leprosy of the soul. The body—every body—decays rapidly—it is ultimately the soul that counts. Surely, the soul of every human being counts. But, the soul of a profession, a medical profession, counts as well.

There is a moral leprosy that can eat away within the body politic as well as within the corpus medicum that Catholics—most especially those called to practice medicine—must persevere in confronting.

Such moral leprosy lurks, for instance, within some “quality of life” dilemmas: judgments which so often end in denying appropriate medical care to individuals deemed by some to be unworthy. These mindsets pervade parts of the medical profession today and invite some clinicians to “play God,” in seeing some human life as disposable because it is not useful.

And what of the unease—indeed the dis-ease—which all citizens of Maryland should feel in a State with monumental budget deficits and drastic cuts in human services where, nevertheless, \$12.4 million has been allocated for the Maryland Stem Cell Research Fund much, if not most of which, goes into research unnecessarily involving the destruction of “manufactured” human embryos. Over the past three years, our economically struggling State has allotted \$56 million to this cause.

We are all aware of the national debate over universal health care consuming our nation’s energies these many months. A number of Catholic bishops have offered valuable contributions to the discussion, stating broad ethical and moral principles. We support, strongly, universal access to health care to the extent possible. Surely,

we can do more than we are now doing, as a wealthy nation such as is ours, to reach that goal.

Noteworthy, too are the recent public promises of President Barack Obama and Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius, who unequivocally stated that they would not allow taxpayer funding of abortion in any health care reform legislation. The President also commits himself to the rights of conscience on the part of all involved who object to the destruction of human life in any of its stages. We pray that they will be true to this commitment as the bill moves forward, but their unwillingness to encourage several Congressional committees in this direction raises serious questions as to their resolve.

Even here in Baltimore City, as reported in last week's The Catholic Review, we've seen how aggressively good efforts can be opposed, where a bill before the City Council would—believe it or not—perniciously and wantonly target for arbitrary penalties the valuable contributions of prolife pregnancy resource centers. These centers are non-profit organizations that provide assistance such as parenting classes, baby formula and maternity clothes, to women desperate for help to carry their baby to term.

In all of my years I have never heard of a legislative body ordering a private, charitable organization to advertise what they will not do, under stiff penalties—in this case, \$500 a day.

It is all too obvious that today's culture of death tolerates no competition. Our work, good and faithful people of God, is cut out for us.

But, like St. Jagan and Father Damien, we will persevere and stay the course. We must.