

# Protecting the Voice of God Within

## The Catholic Review

Early this year a Baltimore woman asked me for an appointment to plead a very urgent cause. Years ago, after the birth of her first child, she consulted doctor after doctor, all of whom told her that her medical condition necessitated her sterilization. A strong, knowledgeable Catholic, she refused their counsel and finally found a physician who knew and appreciated Catholic moral teaching. She is now the mother of seven and in excellent health. Why, she asked, is it so difficult to be supported in her beliefs by medical professionals, some of whom were Catholic?

With her at our meeting that morning were three physicians, two of whom are gynecologists from non-Catholic hospitals in our Archdiocese. They related the pressures they experience constantly from their peers and patients to act in ways contrary to their beliefs in right moral medical practice in matters ranging from abortion, contraception, and sterilization, to in-vitro fertilization, beginning of life technologies, and euthanasia. These conscientious professionals, and countless others, are fighting medical moral currents strong, widespread and difficult to withstand.

If individuals such as these experience such pressures, what about Catholic hospitals, clinics and pharmacies facing these challenges but on a much broader scale—from forces within the medical establishment, certainly, but now and increasingly from governmental encroachments via legislation and directives in conflict with our deeply rooted moral convictions.

Such pressures were the focus of this past Saturday's Symposium for Catholic Medical Professionals: Conscience and Ethical Dilemmas in Catholic Healthcare. In my introduction to the group of more than 200, most of whom were area Catholics working in the field of medicine, I asked rhetorically, "If Catholic medical ethics is not arbitrary—and surely it is not—what is the Christian anthropology, the meaning and identity of the human person from which our moral teachings emanate? How can our moral medical decisions keep up with the rapid growth of medical

technologies? Are there 'oughts' that good -willed professionals can agree on and how do we build on these to protect the dignity of the human person? Can we stem the erosion of conscience rights once considered sacred? And finally, what are the conscience issues facing Catholic medical care and caregivers—how are we addressing them and how could we better do so?

To help those of us present discern an answer to these questions, Dr. Janet Smith, renowned author and speaker on Catholic teachings on sexuality and on bioethics, delivered the keynote address. Dr. Smith said, "Conscience isn't our opinion about what's right and what's wrong...it is listening to the voice of God within. What does God want me to do in this situation, not what I think is right in this situation."

Though the topic had been chosen long before the election, the recent announcement that President Obama's administration plans to revoke a federal regulation that shields health workers who refuse to participate in abortions or other medical activities that go against their beliefs, made it all the more relevant.

The accompanying article by George Matysek in this week's Catholic Review provides a more detailed look at the threat this legislation poses to Catholic healthcare workers and the strong support offered by the presenters who spoke at Saturday's symposium. It is our hope that this effort will develop into an annual speaking event bringing together healthcare professionals and ethicists to share mutual insights and concerns and to deepen our appreciation of the rich tradition of Catholic moral theology. To see video of the entire symposium, I encourage you to visit [www.archbalt.org](http://www.archbalt.org).