

White Mass Homily

My thanks to the Baltimore chapter of the Catholic Medical Association for choosing our beautiful Basilica of the Assumption to celebrate their annual White Mass. My special thanks to the Chapter and Dr. Marie Boursiquot, your President, for inviting me to lead you in the Eucharist and I welcome and greet all of you, especially Dr. Louis Breschi your National President of whom Baltimore is so proud.

One week ago today, almost at this very hour, I was privileged to concelebrate Mass with our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI in St. Peter's Basilica to mark the canonization of five new saints of the Church. 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.

On All Saints Day, two weeks from today, we will mark last week's canonization of the foundress of the Little Sisters of the Poor, St. Jeanne Jugan, with a Mass in her honor here in our Basilica. Today, the Little Sisters of the Poor number more than 2800 in 30 countries and with 30 houses for the elderly in the United States. And it was all begun by a humble, almost anonymous young French woman whose rule of life was one which every Christian must adopt, including, surely, those of you in the medical profession: "Look on the poor with compassion and Jesus will look on you with kindness." In this effort, she persevered, stayed the course.

Another of the newly canonized saints was Father Damien of Molokai, the leper priest whose story is well known to most of us. Not yet known as Hansen's disease, and then thought to be incurable and highly contagious, the scourge of leprosy was the most feared disease of its time.

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."

Not that it was ever easy, much less pleasant, and at times overwhelmingly repugnant. “Sometimes” he said about listening to the confessions of the lepers, “I have had to hold my nose.” But he stayed in the confessional — seven and ten hours a day. He persevered, stayed the course.

The stench of the congregation in his little church of St. Philomena became so bad one day that he was tempted to run outdoors. Nausea threatened, to such an extent that he feared he would be unable to consume the Host and the Precious Blood. He persevered, stayed the course and in 10 years turned a people with low esteem and little hope into a model colony. For the first time in most of those thousands of lives, abandoned souls felt the loving touch of Christ.

Hideous though they may be to look at, he said, “They have souls redeemed by the adorable blood of the Divine Savior.”

Surely, everyone in your noble profession has had experiences somewhat akin to those of Damien, but probably never as intense and prolonged. And some, if not most, persevere in such a challenging environment precisely because you are deeply rooted in the ethos of your call as medical professionals.

Would not the committed Christian, indeed the conscientious member of the Catholic Medical Association not only share that praiseworthy ethos, but experience it on a far deeper level?

You, along with ever-conscientious believers, should 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. For yours 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. One is reminded of similar scenes in India, as Blessed Teresa of Calcutta explained that in these most disfigured and repugnant bodies, we see Jesus in distressing disguises—this Jesus who insists that whatever you do for the least of these, you do unto me.

So is your call to faith every day, every moment of the day.

But worse than leprosy of the body is leprosy of the soul. The body, as we well know, decays rapidly—it is ultimately the soul that counts. The soul of every human being counts. Indeed, the soul of a profession counts as well.

There is a moral leprosy that can eat away within the body politic as well as the corpus medicum and you good Catholic medical professionals must persevere, stay the course in attacking that moral leprosy within your own noble community.

Such 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 denials pervade parts of the medical profession today and invite some clinicians to “play God.” Pope John Paul II described this subtle but corrosive presumption as follows: It is clear that, “There is no place in the world for anyone who appears completely at the mercy of others and radically dependent on them, and can only communicate through the silent language of a profound sharing of suffering.” (*EV* #19)

And what are we to say of an unease 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 funded for the Maryland Stem Cell Research Fund much, if not most of which, goes into research unnecessarily involving the destruction of human embryos. Over the past three years, \$56 million has been allotted to this cause.

Thank you, Catholic medical professionals and continue to stay the course in upholding and promoting the consistent, clear and unchangeable principle of life enunciated by Pope John Paul II:

“The use of human embryos or fetuses as an object of experimentation constitutes a crime against their dignity as human beings who have a right to the same respect owed a child once born, just as to every person.” (*EV* #63)

We are all aware of the national debate over universal health care consuming our nation’s energies these many weeks. How and when will it end, I doubt anyone

would hazard a guess.

A number of Catholic bishops have offered valuable contributions to the discussion, stating broad ethical and moral principles and avoiding involvement with those statistics, specifics and logistics that belong to the legislative and health care professionals. 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 society such as is ours, to reach that goal.

For our part, we note gratefully the recent public promises of President Obama and Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius, who unequivocally stated that they would not allow public funding for abortion in any health care reform legislation. The President also commits himself to the right of conscience on the part of all involved who object to the destruction of human life in any of its stages. Hopefully, our Nation's executive leadership will actively and unambiguously pursue that pledge: indeed, unless specific legislation is passed the administration's pledges will prove to be empty. We pray that they will be true to this commitment as the bill moves forward.

Our bottom line is: health care for as many as possible without killing and with respect for conscience, and we are grateful to our Catholic organizations and facilities for this full support of these inseparable goals. To tolerate abortion in order to balance the budget, tempting as it might be to some, is both venal and immoral.

The conscience rights of Catholic medical professionals was the subject of our first annual symposium this past spring, which many of you attended. I would ask for your continued support as we seek to make a special annual effort to bring in quality speakers who can address today's pressing, controverted issues which confront you and your peers. The weight can be heavy to bear, but from you who have been given much, the Lord will expect much in return. Christ's grace will supply you as it does all who seek genuine holiness.

We thank you for your sacrifices and your continuing commitment to uphold our Church's long-standing, clear and sometimes lonely clarion call for life, despite widespread and vociferous opposition. Persevere and stay the course.

Even here in Baltimore City we've seen how aggressively our efforts can be opposed, where a bill before the City Council would—believe it or not—perniciously and wantonly target for arbitrary penalties the good work of prolife pregnancy resource centers. These centers are non-profit organizations that provide emotional, material and practical assistance to pregnant and parenting women seeking assistance.

It is all too obvious that today's culture of death tolerates no competition. But we will persevere and stay the course.

Recently, our Holy Father repeated his respect for American democratic institutions and called for "a renewed commitment to reasoned dialog in the discernment of wise and just policies respectful of human nature and human dignity." Then, in addressing our new ambassador to the Holy See, Pope Benedict referred to the

"protection of human dignity and respect for the inalienable right to life from the moment of conception to natural death, as well as the protection of the right to conscientious objection on the part of healthcare workers, and indeed all citizens."

In my two years in Baltimore, I have come to know and admire so many of you in the Catholic health care professions. It is, it must be a priority of mine to support you as you, in turn make great sacrifices to support our Church's teachings on the beginnings of life, respect for life at all stages, and the encouragement of traditional family life.

May your numbers and your commitment grow, and with the prayer of the letter to the Hebrews on our lips as we continue our Eucharistic Sacrifice: "Let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help." And may we all persevere and stay the course.