The Vocation of the Health Care Professional in the Time of COVID-19

This special edition of OSI’s bulletin is devoted to a reflection by Fr. Francis Hannafey. See the end of the essay for a list of resources for further study and a personal message from Fr. Hannafey.

For many years I taught a course at Fairfield University called Contemporary Moral Problems. I was always greatly impressed by the nursing and pre-med majors who registered for the class. These students—preparing for the health professions—most likely came into the class knowing that we covered leading issues in health care ethics like stem cell research, human reproductive technologies, human sexual ethics, and questions about end-of-life medical care. I enjoyed working with these students being trained for future work in the health care professions. They demonstrated intelligence, hard work, dedication, and passion for the complex ethical issues we studied together. I was especially impressed by what I perceived on their part to be a clear and growing understanding of their vocation and calling to work in medicine to serve and bring healing to persons in need. These students showed much enthusiasm and passion to work with and help the sick—signs to me that they were in fact discovering their own life vocations. It was a joy to work with them. We explored ethical theories and medical case studies to prepare them for highly professional and moral medical practice in their future careers. I found in these young women and men honesty and commitment to serve the good of others—especially the sick and vulnerable—and this still brings me encouragement and inspiration.

I admire the vocation of medical professionals to serve as healers for others. Over the years I have come to understand that all vocations (such as marriage, committed relationships, parenting, single life, and religious life) have the potential to bring us vibrant life and lasting fulfillment. At the same time, our vocations can at times be dramatically tested. Such testing is happening now in real ways in the lives of the good women and men who work in health care. Now in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, the lives and vocations of health care professionals are under great stress and facing grave challenges. The entire health care system around the world is strained to the limit. Medical professionals who are “on the front lines” in ICU wards and in emergency departments are directly dealing with tremendous stress and facing dangerous personal health risks. Other professionals in health care who are assisting in different ways in the system are also affected—in less direct ways—but they too are enduring unprecedented professional and personal challenges. The present COVID-19 emergency raises many questions and problems for health care professionals both in terms of their own vocations in the important work of healing and also for their professional and personal lives.

The Christian Churches have for centuries acknowledged medicine as a noble profession. Scripture tells us in much detail about how deeply Jesus cared for the sick. A central part of Jesus’ own

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ministry and mission was to bring healing and hope to those suffering in mind, body, and spirit. Those in the health professions who identify themselves as Christian (and also others) continue the fundamental healing work of Christ in the world. In other words, Jesus’ own healing ministry serves as an essential background for our thinking about the experience and vocations of health care professionals.

We are told in the Gospels that Jesus healed many diseases, yet the specific nature of these illnesses is often not identified or named (Lk 4:40-41). Throughout the Gospels and in other Christian writings we learn of Jesus’ great concern for and action on behalf of the sick. It is clear that healing is a central part of Jesus’ own life and ministry—and therefore a central part of every Christian’s own life in the world.

Jesus’ sensitivity for and care for the sick provides both an example and inspiration for health care professionals and for all of us. This is especially true in this challenging time. Yet, there are many difficult and pressing questions: How to balance the serious risks? How to live under great stress and fatigue? What are proper stances and judgments before the many newly emerging ethical questions? And there are other questions, such as what constitutes the healing vocation in a time of crisis? These questions are important and indeed complex.

The Roman Catholic teaching tradition understands the medical profession to involve a special calling—a vocation to minister to the sick and dying. Health care workers live out “a special vocation to share in carrying forth God’s life-giving and healing work” (See US Bishops, Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services). Pope John Paul II similarly described health care as a vocation, in noting that it is “a response to a transcendent call which takes shape in the suffering and appealing countenance of the patient” (John Paul II, Pontifical Council, Charter for Health Care Workers, no. 3). I believe that if we are living our true vocations—which are ultimately a gift and calling from God—then the Lord will give us what we need to fulfill the callings we have received. There are challenges in all vocations—sometimes deeply serious obstacles and tests along the way. Medical professionals are now being challenged and tested in profound and extraordinary ways. Even in this special time, there are things we can do to help us find, sustain, and fulfill our human vocations. If I may, I wish to propose three practical responses for health care professionals during this pandemic: prayer, ongoing dialogue with others who share similar vocational callings, and finding some basic level of personal life balance—all of which are important and even necessary to carry on during this crisis.

A time like this calls us back to the basics in the practice of moral medical care. In a recent conversation with my old friend Peter Clark SJ (Professor and Director of the Institute of Clinical Bioethics at St. Joseph University and the John McShain Chair in Ethics), Peter reminded me of the fundamentals of Christian morality that we studied together years ago. These basics are always part of effective and moral health care practice. It is especially important to treat all patients with dignity and respect. We have important obligations to protect the most vulnerable—the elderly, disabled, and those without medical insurance. Christian morality demands this from all of us. There are also massively complex and difficult questions of justice in resource allocation and decisions about withdrawing or withholding treatment. These clinical situations and the related moral questions require careful discernment and the helpful assistance of the experts. The specific ethical questions raised by COVID-19, such as allocation of ventilators to patients, are made even more challenging when considering that varied health care systems and also individual US states
have developed their own distinct protocols for decision-making. Finding clear answers to the many ethical issues that arise in the COVID-19 crisis is far from easy.

I recently heard a statement by Dr. Daniel Sulmasy (Acting Director of the Kennedy Institute of Ethics and Andre Hellegers Professor of Biomedical Ethics at Georgetown University) that I find to be right on target as we consider and address the ethical issues raised by the COVID-19 crisis. Dr. Sulmasy observed, “the circumstances are extraordinary, but the ethics are not”. (Sulmasy, speaking during Webinar, Berkeley Center, Georgetown University). In other words, in these extraordinary human circumstances we need our ethics now more than ever. This is certainly the case for health care professionals now and for all of us. The central moral-medical principles (beneficence, non-malfeasance, justice, and autonomy) must continue to guide us. There are likely new and especially challenging applications of long-standing moral guidelines in this time of pandemic. But, essentially, the trusted moral ideas and practices of health care still hold true and will continue to guide us. Doing good, doing no harm, treating persons fairly, and giving patients freedom in medical choices are the bedrock for us.

As I think about COVID-19 it strikes me that the rich and inspiring Catholic teachings about the common good provide us a beacon during these dark and tough days. This crisis has shown us how interconnected we all really are—in our families, communities, cities, nations, and globally. The choices and acts we carry out really do affect others. The virus shows us this clearly. Further, I believe more than ever that the virtues (exemplary ethical behavior and moral excellence of mind and spirit) are perhaps the most human and moral response needed by us all in this time of crisis. Some key virtues that may support us now include fortitude, perseverance, courage, and good old-fashioned human kindness. These are the virtues that COVID-19 may call each of us to live daily—in our work and in our lives at home with loved ones.

Serious justice and distribution questions now arise for us in new ways. It may be that this crisis offers us a deeper and more real look at the sinful structural injustices present in societies around the world. While the virus is showing us how vulnerable we all really are individually in our own communities and within national boundaries, we can also see more clearly how the many who are most vulnerable around the world are faring. The suffering and the poor of the world are now suffering even more. The Gospel teachings of Jesus and his enduring care for the sick, the poor, and the vulnerable can only move us to consider what this experience ultimately teaches us and how we are called to respond in light of the demands of justice and the common good of all.

A fundamental principle of Catholic social teaching is the urgent requirement to protect the dignity of the human person in all societies. These are vast and serious questions raised for us in our present and post-COVID-19 experience going forward. Yet, the virus and our experience will not let us off the hook, so to speak, in eventually addressing these kinds of questions. One obvious global response is the need for greater cooperation and solidarity between nations of the world. We are deeply vulnerable globally. I believe that this crisis raises for us the moral urgency to consider thoughtfully how to support and create needed global institutions to protect us in the future and to protect the dignity of the human person around the world. (For more on this, see David Hollenbach, Webinar, Berkeley Center, Georgetown University)

Shortages of basic supplies and unpreparedness of infrastructure make clear the need for more development as we seek to support the important vocations of medical professionals around the world. It seems clear that the virus continues to teach us that more sustained investment in health care systems and support for the training and personal development of medical professionals will help societies protect the dignity of persons around the world.

As a member of the faith community, I wish to offer my personal own words of encouragement and support of all the dedicated health care
professionals at Old St. Joseph and beyond. As much as possible, please do all that you can to stay grounded in your spiritual, physical, and emotional health and well-being. This will likely be tough to do, and it will likely not be possible every day. Yet, when possible, try to find ways for your own Sabbath of rest and prayer—whenever or however this may happen.

Your training is sound, professional, and has prepared you well morally and personally. Trust your training and preparation. Please also trust in your own important vocation. The principles of medical ethics and your own personal moral commitments still hold true—perhaps more than ever—in a time of great stress and challenge. Talk with colleagues and loved ones however and whenever appropriate for you. If you are a person of faith, and if it is helpful, look to Jesus in the Gospel stories who by deed and example teaches us so much about the vocational ministry of healing and care for the sick. Please also know that many persons around the world support you and pray for you daily as you live out your important and graced vocation at this time.

Years ago, in Boston, early in my Jesuit in training, I did something that most Jesuits do along the way. I believe that it is still called the “hospital experiment.” I clearly remember how I found myself praying for the patients, the nurses, the doctors, and staff as I walked to and from my work at the hospital. Patients were very ill, and the doctors and nurses were especially stressed and stretched too thin in those days. This was for me a richly graced time of prayer. While these were more ordinary times in health care, I remember how much this “prayer while walking” helped me in the stressful environment of a city hospital that primarily served the more economically poor members of the community. Prayer can certainly help us in many contexts of our lives and there are many ways of praying. Brief moments of “prayer on the run” may be a useful way to center oneself. Prayer for individual patients, asking the Lord for needed strength and perseverance, and prayer for colleagues has always helped me. Prayer, however it happens, especially in crisis situations, is a welcome grace and can gently lead us to being more grounded and may even prepare us to be closer to moral virtue in our thoughts and actions.

I remember reading a wonderful book by Dr. Daniel Sulmasy called A Balm for Gilead: Meditations on Spirituality and the Healing Arts. In it. Dr. Sulmasy draws on a letter by the monk and spiritual writer Thomas Merton called “A Letter to a Young Intern”. Sulmasy quotes Merton and writes, “[e]very career in medicine will inevitably be marked by its share of disappointment, frustration, and confusion. The real hope, then, is not in something we think we can do, but in God, who is making something out of it in some way we cannot see” (Sulmasy 2006, p. 17-18). Perhaps our own prayer these days must in the end rely entirely on the Lord’s grace, love, and protection. The Healing Christ in this Easter season is especially close to us as we do all we can to help and heal the sick during these tough days. Our faith is that we are not alone as we encounter the Risen Christ in our prayer in these urgent times. It is the Lord who supports and sustains us in ways that we cannot imagine or often even perceive. We can have faith and hope for the future.

—Francis T. Hannafey SJ

Images: Luke the Physician, St. Mary’s Pembrokeshire, stained glass, 1911; Jesus Healing the Sick, Gusave Doré, 19th century.
A personal message to health care professionals in the Old St. Joseph parish community.

To the extent that this may in any way be helpful, I am personally available to be in contact privately and confidentially (via Skype, FaceTime, or Phone) with health care professionals at OSJ who wish to discuss their present experience or who may wish to address specific ethical challenges they may be facing at this time. I am a Jesuit priest of the USA Northeast Province and a staff member at OSJ. I am professionally trained in ethics. I have studied, researched, and taught in the field for many years, including in the field of bioethics. I am happy to offer any assistance I can. If I do not know the answer to specific questions you may have, I likely know where to look to find answers that may help you. I would also be grateful to learn from you and offer any support that I am able. All personal contacts and conversations are confidential. You can reach me at fhannafey@oldstjoseph.org.

Resources for Health Care Professionals

Berkeley Center (BC), www.berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu Georgetown University. Timely webinars and essays on COVID-19.


Kennedy Institute of Ethics (KIE) www.kennedyinstitute.georgetown.edu. A leading ethics center at Georgetown University.

INFORMATION

Pastor
Fr. Walter Modrys SJ (pastor@oldstjoseph.org)

Parochial Vicar
Fr. Francis Hannafey SJ (fhannafey@oldstjoseph.org)

In Residence
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Fr. Ed O’Donnell SJ (eodonnell@oldstjoseph.org)

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BJ Brown (bjbrown@oldstjoseph.org)

Business Manager
Eric German (germane@oldstjoseph.org)

Director of Music
Mark Bani (music@oldstjoseph.org)

Parish Offices
(office@oldstjoseph.org)

Religious Education (PREP) Coordinator
Christine Szczepanowski (prep@oldstjoseph.org)

Faith, Food & Friends Director
Deborah Hluchan (faithandfriends@oldstjoseph.org)

Director of Hospital Ministry
Tom Volkert (hospitalEM@oldstjoseph.org)

Rectory Office Hours
Monday through Friday: 9:30 AM to 4:30 PM
Sunday: 9:00 AM to 2:00 PM

Mass Times
Monday through Saturday: 12:05 PM
Saturday Vigil Mass for Sunday: 5:30 PM
Sunday: 7:30, 9:30, 11:30 AM and 6:30 PM
Holy Days: 12:05 and 7:00 PM

Medical Emergency
In a medical emergency when the need for a priest is urgent, please call the rectory.

Hearing Enhancements
Old St. Joseph’s is equipped with an audio hearing loop. Switch on the T-coil function of your device to use the loop. Booklets with the Sunday readings are available in the rear of the church.

Registration
Registration forms are available in the rectory office during normal office hours, on the bookcases in the back of the church and online at www.oldstjoseph.org. They can be returned to the parish office by mail or in person.

Sacrament of Reconciliation
A priest is available for the Sacrament of Reconciliation Monday through Saturday from 11:30 AM–12:00 PM or by appointment.

Sacrament of Baptism
If you want to arrange a baptism, please contact Fr. Hannafey (fhannafey@oldstjoseph.org) at least two months before the desired date.

Eucharist for the Homebound
To arrange to receive Communion at home, please contact the parish offices.

The Sacrament of Anointing
The Sacrament of Anointing (the sacrament of the sick) is offered during the 12:05 PM Mass on the first Saturday of each month. Homebound or hospitalized persons wanting to receive the Sacrament of Anointing should call the parish office.

Sacrament of Matrimony
If you want to be married at Old St. Joseph’s, please visit our website, oldstjoseph.org and read the material under the heading Weddings. Please call the parish office at 215-923-1766 at least nine months before your desired wedding date.

Rite of Christian Initiation
If you are an adult wishing to be baptized, or to receive First Eucharist and Confirmation, or are a baptized non-Catholic seeking full communion with Catholic Church, please call the parish office or email rcia@oldstjoseph.org.

Mass of Christian Burial
To schedule a funeral or memorial Mass, ask your funeral director to call the parish office.

Parish Pastoral Council
(osjpc@oldstjoseph.org)

Parish Finance Council
Paul Shay, chair

Historic Preservation Corporation Board
Fr. Walter Modrys SJ, president

Adult Education
Rita O’Brien and Jeanmarie Zippo
(adulted@oldstjoseph.org)

Eldership
Pat Nelson (eldership@oldstjoseph.org)

Parish Life
Joe Casey (parishlife@oldstjoseph.org)

Ignatian Spirituality and Formation
Len Mancini (osjspirituality@oldstjoseph.org)

Women, Faith and Fellowship
Rana McNamara (wff@oldstjoseph.org)

Young Adult Community
(osjyac@gmail.com)

Altar Servers
Maria Ramirez (altarserver@oldstjoseph.org)

Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion
Bill Stewart (EM@oldstjoseph.org)

Hospital Ministry
Luanne Balestrucci (hospitalEM@oldstjoseph.org)

Homebound Ministry
Neal Hébert (homeEM@oldstjoseph.org)

Lectors
Lou Anne Bulik (lectors@oldstjoseph.org)

Ushers
Nikola Sizgorich (ushers@oldstjoseph.org)

Children’s Liturgy of the Word
Peggy Connolly (clow@oldstjoseph.org)