

Share in the healing mission of the Church

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

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*White Mass
Diocesan Pastoral Center Chapel
Fargo, ND*

I'm happy to be with all of you for this White Mass, this traditional celebration of the liturgy for those who work in health care. This is an especially important gathering, because through you, the healing work of Christ continues. In you, Jesus continues his healing ministry, "curing the people of every disease and illness," as St. Matthew tells us.

First, I thank you for your work in the field of health care, and I encourage you to persevere in this noble profession. I could never claim to have the medical expertise that you have, but as a priest I was very blessed to work in Catholic health care through my service on hospital boards and ethics committees. I learned a lot through those experiences, and I have grown to appreciate even more the commitment that you make to the well being of others, whom you care for and treat, often at great personal cost to yourselves. I can't help thinking of the nurses who have become ill and the many other doctors, nurses, and other professionals who literally risk their lives to respond to the ebola outbreak. We pray for the recovery of those who are ill and the protection of those who care for them. And we remember the words of Jesus to his apostles: "There is no greater love than this, to lay down your life for your friends."

Although I'm not a physician or nurse or any kind of health care professional, it seems apparent to me that this is not an easy time to be involved in the work of health care. To borrow a phrase from Dickens, you could say it is "the best of times and the worst of times." It is undoubtedly exciting to see and practice with the great advances in medicine that have developed in recent years, and I'm sure you and your colleagues are seeing successes that others would not have dreamed of 50 or even 25 years ago. There is great attention and interest in health care; it's on everyone's mind as we come to grips with the huge changes that have occurred in the health care world of the last few years.

So yes, in one sense these are the best of times. But in another way, we might say these are the worst of times. After all, you as health care professionals are expected more and more to practice your art in ways that seem to conflict with our vision of the human person, with our belief in the dignity of every person, and with our responsibility to God. You and your colleagues are faced with dilemmas that your predecessors did not face. But even so, you have an important mission within your own profession. You can be a leaven among your colleagues and in the institutions where you work. By your own witness, whether quietly or more openly, you show to the sick the healing grace of Christ, who Matthew tells us cured all the sick. By your compassion and determination to help those you serve, you bring Christ to those who suffer. You become his healing hands and his comforting voice.

Your witness also extends to your colleagues in health care. Just as each one of us is called to give good example to others, so you should strive to show your co-workers what it means to be a healer in the image of Christ. Quoting Isaiah, Matthew tells us "He took away our

infirmities and bore our diseases.” You have an opportunity to show your peers how they too can value the lives of those who suffer, how they can be true servants of the sick and the infirm.

You also have a weighty responsibility, and that is to defend the rights and the innate dignity of the sick and the suffering. Our culture values expediency and efficiency, sometimes even if this means setting aside those most in need. But Jesus valued every person, even the most insignificant in the eyes of the world, and the Church continues to proclaim the irreplaceable worth of each one of us, even those who are advanced in age, or frail, or terminally ill. St. John Paul II declared that “every human life is sacred, every human person is sacred.” And by the way, today is the anniversary of his election as Pope in 1978. Certainly in his last years he showed the world that there is dignity even in old age and illness. As our culture becomes more callous and seems to lose its awareness of the person’s innate dignity, you can be a sort of apostle of life, a servant to the vulnerable. It might seem like an uphill climb, but even one person’s integrity and compassion can be a powerful influence, just as a tiny bit of leaven can transform a great mass of dough.

Last year, Pope Francis spoke to a group of health care professionals in his usual very straightforward way. He called upon them to be witnesses and diffusers of the culture of life. He called upon them to recognize the transcendent dimension of human life, the imprint of God’s creative work in the face of every person. He said this is a task of the new evangelization that often requires going against the tide and paying for it personally. Even so, the Lord is counting on you to spread the “gospel of life.” The Holy Father tells us that the “credibility of health care is not measured solely by efficiency, but above all by the attention and love given to the person, whose life is always sacred and inviolable.”

I don’t need to tell you that all concern for the sick and suffering is part of the Church’s life and mission. It’s been that way since the beginning. So each one of you, in your own way of caring for the weak, the sick, and the suffering, participates very personally in the life and mission of the Church. You don’t have to work in a Catholic institution to somehow share in the apostolate of the Church, so whatever your situation may be, by your involvement in health care you can be closely united to the Church’s healing mission. And of course, you are therefore close to the mission of Jesus himself. Just as his healing power manifested the advent of God’s kingdom into the world, so your work of healing draws you more deeply into that kingdom too.

And so, I encourage you to persevere. Pope Francis acknowledged that courage is needed today to bear witness to the fullness of the Gospel, the Gospel of life. So I urge you, with him, to bear witness courageously - to your patients, to your colleagues, and to the culture in which we live. Continue to give your talents and gifts to the healing of others in a way that is consistent with our understanding of the sacredness of human life, and with our faith in God, who is the author of life. May Jesus, the healer of all, be with you.