



**White Mass Homily**  
**The Most Reverend Paul J. Swain**  
**Bishop of Sioux Falls**  
**October 18, 2017**  
*Prayed on the Memorial of Saint Luke the Evangelist*  
**Cathedral of Saint Joseph**

Thank you for being with us today as we celebrate this “White Mass” where we recognize, honor and pray for all those in the healing ministry of health care, Catholic and not. It is named the White Mass because of the tradition of wearing white garments, although that is less common these days.

We priests wear red because this is the feast day of St. Luke the Evangelist who is believed to be martyred, shed his blood for the faith. He is the patron saint of health care and health care providers. St. Paul tells us Luke was himself a physician. He wrote the Gospel of Luke as well as the Acts of the Apostles. Scripture scholars have described the Gospel of Luke as the gospel of mercy, of the poor, of prayer, and of joy. All of these reflect the tapestry of health care.

In the readings for this Mass today<sup>1</sup> the importance of working with others is raised. St. Paul in the letter to Timothy speaks of those who were and who are now with him, Luke in particular. In the Gospel Jesus sends out the disciples two by two. St. Gregory suggests that is a symbol for living the Great Commandments to both love God and love neighbor. It also perhaps is a reminder that alone we can do little. We must work together as a team and as a family. You in the health professions know that so well.

While we rightly recognize those in high profile roles, the doctors and administrators we also ought acknowledge all those who stand behind them, including nurses, physician assistants, chaplains, technicians, scientists, maintenance and office staffs and so many others including the volunteers and families. Without their dedication outstanding healthcare would not be possible.

The healing ministry of Christ is both beautiful in its presence to those hurting but also challenging. It is a demanding call with the myriad of complexities including ethical and moral dilemmas, the rapid development of technology, medicines and treatment options, and the complicated mixture of caring for persons and complying with the burdens of government regulation and insurance restrictions.

Someone suggested that this demanding call has a threefold task: it is ministry of patience at a time when so many out of fear or pain make patience hard; it is a ministry of listening even when family-squabbles interfere and emotions are intense; and it is a ministry of respect of each person despite time constraints and heavy workloads.

Pope Francis has said: “Time spent with the sick is holy time. It is a way of praising God who conforms us to the image of his Son, who came to serve, not to be served.”<sup>2</sup>

The Bishops of the United States have issued Ethical and Religious Directives<sup>3</sup> to help those in the health care professions to be grounded in the teachings of Christ especially when confronted with ethical questions or secular pressures to treat others as commodities. While they are required of all health care providers who identify themselves as Catholic, they also are good guidelines for others especially Catholics serving in non-Catholic institutions. They are based on five principles<sup>3</sup>:

“First, Catholic health care ministry is rooted in a commitment to promote and defend human dignity; this is the foundation of its concern to respect the sacredness of every human life from the moment of conception until death.

“Second, the biblical mandate to care for the poor requires us to express this in concrete action at all levels of Catholic health care. This mandate prompts us to work to ensure that our country’s health care delivery system provides adequate health care for the poor.

“Third, Catholic health care ministry seeks to contribute to the common good. The common good is realized when economic, political and social conditions ensure protection for the fundamental rights of all individuals and enable all to fulfill their common purpose and reach their common goals.

“Fourth, Catholic health care ministry exercises responsible stewardship of available health care resources. A just health care system will be concerned both with promoting equity of care—to assure that the right of each person to basic health care is respected—and with promoting the good health of all in the community.

“Fifth, within a pluralistic society, Catholic health care services will encounter requests for medical procedures contrary to the moral teachings of the Church. Catholic health care does not offend the rights of individual conscience by refusing to provide or permit medical procedures that are judged morally wrong by the teaching authority of the Church.”

As those in this healing profession know so well, not everyone is a good patient and not everyone follows your advice, including me. Surely the temptation comes on occasion to say – “if only you had listened, life would be easier today.” Yet you graciously receive people where they are and treat them with kindness as best as you can.

While there are many fulfilling moments, the human and medical realities also have their challenges. Those times when treatments do not work, those times when you must share the hard realities, those times when family disputes intrude, those times when fear, especially in children, complicates, those times when unrealistic expectations are acted-out upon you, those times when impatience is wearing and weariness pays a visit, and especially those times when accidents and other tragedies tear at the heart. Through them all you are there with compassion and patience.

There are also the beautiful moments of healing, of hope, of joy. Those times when treatment restores health, those times when pain is relieved, those times when simple presence provides reassurance, and those times when the answer seemed unknown and you took a leap of faith and good came from it.

A quiet example as told by one health care professional<sup>4</sup>:

“I had just filled my coffee cup . . . when an elderly man approached the coffee pot . . . I greeted him and asked ‘How are you, sir?’ He answered with one of the polite metaphors typical of his generation: ‘Faith with occasional clouds.’ He kept his head down, as if he was pondering something, while his coffee cup was filling. When the cup was full he looked up at me. That was when I saw the clouds. A raindrop of tears formed at the corner of his eye. He said ‘My wife has been sick for quite a while. I just came from taking her to the clinic across the way.’ He paused, and had a look of remembered comfort, and said. ‘It’s a wonderful thing when a doctor holds your hand and has tears in her eyes when she tells you the bad news you already knew.’ There was a raindrop in my eye too. We stood together under the cloud, waiting for the moment to pass. And Jesus wept at the coffee pot, and nobody thought it was odd.”

There many similar moments mostly unknown which you could relate, when Christ is present in the suffering and a raindrop of tears appears in your eyes, when comfort is offered that is remembered.

Thank you for your sacrifices, your commitment, your professionalism, your compassion, your patience and your love. May St. Luke patron of health care and health care providers pray for you, the Holy Spirit guide you, and may Mary the Mother of all Life watch over you all.

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1 – 2 Timothy 4: 10-17B, Luke 10: 1-9

2 – Pope Francis’ Message on the *World Day of the Sick*, Dec. 3, 2014

3 – *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, USCCB, Nov. 17, 2009

4 – *Sacred Stories*, Catholic Health Initiatives, 2000