



White Mass Homily
The Most Reverend Paul J. Swain
Bishop of Sioux Falls
October 18, 2016
Prayed on Tuesday during the Memorial of Saint Luke the Evangelist
Cathedral of Saint Joseph

Thank you for praying 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, Catholics and not. It is named the White Mass because of the tradition in the health care profession of wearing white garments when attending patients.

A special welcome to Father David Krogman and Father James Zimmer who serve as chaplains at Avera and Sanford health care facilities. Thank you for your important special ministry.

We are wearing “red” vestments at this “white” Mass because today is the feast day of St. Luke the Evangelist who was martyred, shed his blood for the faith. Believed to be a physician himself, St. Luke is the patron saint of health care and health care providers. Tradition informs us that he was the inspired author of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. Some scripture scholars have described the Gospel of Luke as the gospel of mercy, of the poor, of prayer, and of joy, and also as one of compassion and patience with sinners and the suffering. All of these reflect the rich tapestry of health care.

In both readings today the importance of others is raised. St. Paul in the letter to Timothy¹ speaks of those who were with him and supported him, Luke specifically. In the Gospel² Jesus sends out the disciples two by two. It is a reminder that alone we can do only a little. Certainly in health care team effort is essential. While we rightly recognize those in high profile roles such as the doctors and administrators, it requires the skill and tenacity of all the team to accomplish the ministry, including nurses, assistants, chaplains, technicians, scientists, maintenance and office staffs and so many others. Without them the outstanding healthcare we enjoy, and too often taken for granted, would not be possible.

Those my age grew up with the cartoon characters in Peanuts®. In one cartoon Linus declares to Charlie Brown: “when I grow up I’m going to be a doctor. No, I’m going to be more than a doctor; I’m going to be a great doctor. I want to rise to the greatest height of all; I want to write a syndicated medical column.” You, no matter your role, are already great.

Your work is not always glamorous but it is essential. The Church teaches that access to adequate and affordable health care for all is fundamental to respect for the life and the dignity of every person. It is imperative for private and public leaders of our country to seek to provide for those left behind in our current health care system. How to do so is one of prudential judgment best left to the laity expert in health care, finance and government. Yet, those of us who are privileged to have access today should thank God for you who provide it, and support increased access for others who do not.

Health care today is often seen by some as only a business which requires astute planning and financial deftness. It is also a complicated regulatory mix and even sometimes a political football. At this Mass we put all that aside. Rather we focus on the human dimension of health care. We pray for and with all who day after day perform the miraculous treatments and the tedious tasks to help restore, maintain, and cope with the physical, psychological, emotional and yes even spiritual needs of others. We include their spouses and families in our prayer; they sacrifice to allow the professionals to do their good work.

Compassion and patience also are essential in the healing professions. This is not news but over my years of pastoral ministry and even as a recipient I have learned that not everyone is a good patient. Even more

astounding I am sure is the truth that not everyone follows sound medical advice. Surely the temptation comes occasionally to say – “if only you had listened and followed sound advice, life for you would be easier today.” Yet you in the field graciously receive people where they are and treat them with kindness as best as you can.

While there are many fulfilling moments, healings and recoveries, hopes restored and lives saved, surely the everydayness has its challenges. Those times when treatments do not work, those times when the hard realities must be faced, those times when family disputes intrude, those times when fear especially in children complicates, those times when unrealistic expectations are acted out, those times when impatience is wearing and weariness pays a visit, and especially those times when accidents and other tragedies tear at the heart, you in health care are present as best you are able to serve with compassion and patience. Thank you.

A new priest visited a lady who was to undergo brain surgery the next morning. He did not know what to say; as we all know words so often are inadequate. So he simply told her that he would pray for her during the time of her operation. She thanked him and then she said, “Pray also for the doctors and nurses and all the other staff. If I die they will think they have failed. They will not have. They would have done the best they could do and that is enough. And I hopefully would be in route to see God face to face.” Health care providers need affirmation and a tender touch once in a while. In our small way we do so today at this Mass.

There are of course also beautiful moments of healing, of hope, of joy especially in those times when the answer seemed unknown and a leap of faith was taken from which good came. There is another Peanuts® cartoon where Lucy is sitting at the stand with the sign overhead, the doctor is in. Charlie Brown comes by. He says, “Everything seems hopeless, I’m completely depressed.” Lucy responds, “go home and eat a jelly bread sandwich folded over; five cents, please.” Then she says as an aside, “There are some cures you don’t learn in medical school.” Those in the field know that and live that.

Health care providers are called to follow the healing example of Christ who considered the whole person. By both reason and faith we know that we are to do all we can to protect life from conception through natural death. We are to be prudent stewards of our own bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit and we are to be present to others in their physical and spiritual need.

You in this healing ministry are on the front lines to assure the respect and dignity for all persons. That is why the protection of religious liberty and freedom of conscience are so important, so you can do your jobs with freedom and in ethical ways, and so we can support you.

Pope Francis speaking to a group of doctors once said: “there is no human life more sacred than another, just as there is no human life qualitatively more significant than another. The credibility of a healthcare system 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. Never fail to ask the Lord and the Virgin Mary for the strength to accomplish your work well and to bear witness courageously to the Gospel of life.”

I echo those words for in you health care providers we too see the face of Christ. 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, those you serve and those you love. And, may Mary the Mother of Life and the Mother of health care watch over you all.

¹ – 2 Timothy 4: 10-17B

² – Luke 10: 1-9