

The Mirror Column  
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Bishop William Joensen

### **Finding His Face: Honoring Health Care Personnel**

Earlier this month on February 11th the Church marked the Blessed Mother's appearance to St. Bernadette at Lourdes, France, in 1858; for nearly three decades this date has also been designated World Day of the Sick. The little spring of water indicated by the woman known as the Immaculate Conception is the source of a current of spiritual cleansing and healing on many levels that draws sick persons and their companions, health care personnel who donate their time and services, and the faithful on pilgrimage to this holy oasis of grace and peace. Whatever personal graces may be received, everyone is drawn into a covenant of care, compassion, and renewed hope. The sick and those who surround them behold each other with a gaze that reflects mutual dignity, vulnerability and equality in God's sight.

Each day at Lourdes, the "malades" and those who accompany them process to a sacred destination where they pray in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, forming a holy community of human and divine love. They seek the face of Jesus and find him in the Blessed Sacrament, AND in each other, where distinctions between sick and healthy fall away. As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI meditated when he came to Lourdes in 2008 and presided at Eucharistic adoration, "The sacred host exposed to our view speaks of this infinite power of Love manifested on the glorious Cross." The Emeritus Holy Father encourages those whom he calls brothers, sisters, friends, "Accept to recognize in your lives the presence of him who is present here, exposed to our view. Accept to offer him your very lives!"

For a year we have been presented each day in the media with images of persons ravaged by COVID-19, and the committed, courageous health care personnel who offer their very lives in

keeping with their acts of profession to heal, care, and relieve suffering. We do not caricature them by calling them “superheroes,” for they are very poignantly human, subject to bone-wearying fatigue, anguish, self-doubts, and personal suffering that is embraced and absorbed from patients, their families, and their professional peers.

Our present Pope Francis observes that before the concrete gaze of those who are most vulnerable, “service always looks to their faces, touches their flesh, senses their closeness and even, in some cases, ‘suffers’ that closeness and tries to help them.” They do not look the other way, but share the human yoke of patients they regard as neighbors and members of one human family. They know the protocols and procedures that are generally prescribed according to the standard of care, yet they are also acute listeners, putting forth the effort of discernment and tendering counsel that respects the irreducible uniqueness of each person.

Health care providers represent medicine’s remarkable capacities to intervene and assist the body’s natural potentials for healing. Yet where medicine encounters its own limits, nurses, respiratory technicians, CNAs, physicians, paramedics, pastoral care staff and other members of the team remain mediators of mercy, making mobile connections among family members enabling the exchange of precious glimpses of loved ones, the anointed words that help carry patients to the threshold of this life and the next. They are no mere bystanders, but agents of a mystery that enfolds life, death, and the love that endures forever.

Regardless of their own personal faith commitments, health care personnel bear hope that whatever weighs us down or would enslave us in our finitude does not define us or get the last word; they confirm our hearts’ intuition that every human face reveals meaning and a treasure that can never be spent or exhausted—both in memory and in eternity. Catholic physician Daniel P. Sulmasy contends, “I am fully persuaded. . . that if a Christian speaks out of the

fullness of Christian conviction, and an atheist speaks out of the fullness of atheist conviction, deep spiritual resonances will occur and each can learn enormously from each other.”

Yet especially in clinical settings founded as part of a Catholic and Christian mission to care for the lowly, health care personnel both gain access and represent a sacred window artistically stained by Christian inspiration revealing a God who himself has a face, who is familiar with suffering, who does not skirt but enters into the valley of death with us, only to emerge alive, victorious. Again, Sulmasy: “If medicine is to be a profession, in the fullest sense of the word, it must recognize that it can transcend the limits of its own particularity only if all its particular members practice in a spirit of faith, hope, and love.”

The coronavirus pandemic has shone a light on the nobility and selfless dedication of healthcare personnel in our community, our country, and around the world. We lift them up in our hearts and in the prayers, honors and gratitude we extend to them. The pandemic has also displayed the even more luminous dimension of health care when it is performed in the ambiance of Christian faith. In Christ-centered consciousness, the experiences of human relationship, bodiliness, vulnerability, care, and communion are raised in relief by the prospect and reality of death. These aspects of our experience participate in, and dispose us toward, the good who is God himself. They are part of a conversation between God and ourselves, and among our brothers and sisters subject to the same mortality, the same ultimate “passion” as ourselves.

While the Ash Wednesday dusting of ashes may have been performed differently this year, the optional words are the same: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” We all experience death sooner or later; even now, we are invited to experience a kind of “spiritual death” in our acts of faith and hope, anticipating that what are now is not what we will one day be. We put to rest any recurrent fear and doubts that we will not be at all. Our hope

affirms that connectedness, the continuity of all that happens in life, even if it immediately seems to leave us scattered or scratching our heads. God in Christ does not simply await us at the end of our earthly pilgrimage. God in the flesh, in our health care professionals and in his Eucharistic presence, accompanies us every step of the way.

I understand that applications to Mercy College of Health Sciences in Des Moines have not receded but risen in the wake of the pandemic. How many young peoples' hearts have sensed that in pursuing a path that leads to front line encounters with patients, even at personal risk to themselves, they are not simply seeking a career, but are responding to a call of which they are not the source. Like the trickle of water at Lourdes discovered by St. Bernadette at Blessed Mary's prompting--a trickle that has become a stream--in the midst of a pandemic God has unleashed Spirit energy that is irrigating the lives and witness of so many. So many seeds of hope have been sown, leaving us to ponder what other spiritual fruits God has in store for us. As we continue to seek and find God's face in one another, and strengthen the bonds of fraternity and community that transcend whatever distinct roles and relationships we hold, may we deepen the living, Eucharistic faith that is a sacred foundation for all we do, all we are.