

The challenges of competence and compassion in contemporary medicine

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Compassion was chosen as the theme for the FEAMC symposium, Assisi, May 2022 in conjunction with the preparation of the Special Synod in all the Dioceses of the World. Why this choice?

The theme of the preparation of the Special Synod in all the dioceses around the world at diocesan level is: "Communion, Participation, Mission. The FEAMC wished to join this preparation in a spirit of communion, solidarity, commitment to the Common Good. The FEAMC has also wished to bring to this participation what is specific to its mission: an immersion in the healthcare world, regarding in the first range the relation of the doctor with the patient, given the threats that today weigh on the quality of this relationship, and within a cultural environment of individualism, utilitarianism, hardness of heart, indifferentism.

For the Extended Council of the FEAMC it was a matter of finding in the theme of preparation for the Synod what could be specific to today's Christian doctor, in his vocation as a doctor and Christian.

What ideal to propose to young Christian doctors today?

What can they bring specifically, for the benefit of all, in the context of communion, participation and mission?

The characteristic of the Christian doctor is to seek imitation of our Lord in the practice of his profession and to live the union with Him in this practice, while being professionally, technically, impeccable.

This implies a requirement of quality in the relationship with the patient, and at the same time of quality in diagnosis, treatment and follow-up.

Pope Francis, in his various speeches and especially in his moment of reflection at the beginning of the synodal path on 9 October 2021, offers us an important key for reading and reflection: compassion.

It is about imitating our Lord, being united with Him through compassion for the brother or sister who comes to us in trust.

Pope Francis emphasizes that God, whom we see at work in Jesus Christ, is closeness, compassion, tenderness: this is the 'God's style'¹: this is the 'compendium' of His mercy. Compassion and mercy are in Him one and the same movement of the heart. And, unfortunately, we, in the pressure and turmoil of our days, lose this ability to be moved, to experience the compassion so characteristic of the heart of Christ.

The FEAMC seminar in Assisi, the first meeting among us since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, took place on 27-28-29 May, in seven successive sessions, all seven dedicated to the theme of compassion, with the title *'the challenges of competence and compassion in contemporary medicine'*

The first session was devoted to the relationship between the Christian doctor and the patient in a changing cultural and medical environment that is increasingly technical and less human. What we gain in technical efficiency, we lose in humanity. From familiar and interpersonal,

¹ Homily, University of the Sacred Heart, Rome, November 5 2021.

medicine has become impersonal and organizational.

Pope Francis says it very well: "*In today's hurry, amidst a thousand errands and constant worries, we are losing the ability to be moved and to feel compassion, because we exhaust this return to the heart*"².

In his first lecture, Professor Jozef Glaza presented '*The Good, the Bad, and the Evil*' of our times in the practice of medicine. There are negative or dangerous tendencies, such as '*enhancement*', this project of '*improving humanity*' through genetic manipulation, with the dream of a '*trans humanity*' of the future, freed from all physical limitations that prevent the ascension of humanity to an imaginary heaven. On the contrary, there are limits that currently impede the work of doctors, both in private and hospital settings, with an overload due to the scarcity of said human resources, in terms of the number of doctors, nurses and nurses at the service of patients. Between these two opposing tendencies - the illusory dream of transhumanism and the reality of the scarcity of means - the Christian doctor must make his way in the service of patients in imitation of Jesus himself. A key virtue for him is compassion, compassion for the sick person, compassion for the patient's family, despite all obstacles. For the Church, this goal of compassion in the medical field should become a pastoral priority.

There were seven sessions, 28 papers touching on all aspects of compassion in the different conditions of the medical doctor - patient relationship: from perinatal medicine, gynecology, surgery to '*gender*', end of life and oncology. The great richness of all these contributions goes beyond the possibilities of summarizing them, even in a few words. We have with such a whole a collection of highly valuable testimonies.

Compassion: this is the sure way to be followed today by the Christian doctor who profoundly wishes to exercise his profession in imitation of Christ: it is a matter of listening to the patient, of treating him or her from the perspective of our common humanity, with affection and respect for his or her dignity. If pity can be based on a kind of condescension, compassion implies a sense of shared humanity, without placing oneself in an overhanging position.

For this, it is necessary to move from a "*worldly mentality*", from "*climbing the rungs of the ladder of success*", from "*rising above others*", as Pope Francis tells³, to an attitude of service, of "*immersion*". Jesus asks us to "*immerse*" ourselves in the patients, as he did.

However, it is not enough. Compassion implies helping the other to regain his or her competence, to get out of a "*sole condition of receiving*"⁴, and to regain dignity.

But it is still not enough. Compassion implies professional competence on the part of the doctor: to give this patient what he needs to go ahead and to suffer less in his body as well as in his spirit. The very title given to the Assisi symposium is significant: '*challenges of competence and compassion in contemporary medicine*'. If compassion is the virtue and the way forward for the Christian doctor today, in order to move away from technical and impersonal medicine "*for the disease*"⁵ and find the way back to medicine "*for the patient*"⁶, professional competence is an integral part of compassion. There is no true compassion if there is no professional

² Homily, University of the Sacred Heart, November 5 2021.

³ Angelus, Sunday 17 October 2021

⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, Seuil, 1991, p.223 ; *Oneself as another*, transl. Kathleen Blamey, University of Chicago Press, , 1992, p.190

⁵ « *disease-centered medicine* », Joseph Levenstein, *The patient-centred general practice consultation*, South African Family Practice, September 1984, vol.5, n°9, pp.276-282.

⁶ « *patient-centered medicine* », Joseph Levenstein

competence. This was well shown by the saint Giuseppe Moscati (1880 -1927). It was also well shown more recently by venerable Jérôme Lejeune (1926-1994) who devoted his life to the little 'trisomic' children with their families, in research as well as in daily encounters.

Let us, therefore, follow the path set by our Lord Jesus Christ, on the ways of Palestine: compassion before the crowds like “*sheep without a shepherd*” (Mk 6:34), or “*without nothing to eat*” (Mk, 8:3), compassion for the sick (Mk 9:22-24), compassion for the bereaved (Lk,7:11-15), compassion for families, compassion for the sinful man, slave to his sin,

And let us concretely follow the example of Moscati, of Lejeune, in listening to the patient, in the willingness to help him as he is, in his specificity, through professional competence, at the service of the wounded man in his humanity