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"Be the Person You Ought to Be": A Convocation Speech to the Graduating Medical Student Class of 2020

Ashley K. Fernandes, MD, PhD, FAAP, FACP[1,2]

Abstract

In the age of coronavirus, our beloved Catholic Medical Association (CMA) medical students in the class of 2020, across the country, had "virtual graduations" and commencements, often separated from family and loved ones during a milestone in their vocations. Dr. Ashley K. Fernandes, MD, PhD, a CMA member since he was a medical student, and the 2015 Patrick Guinan CMA Mentor of the Year, was chosen by The Ohio State University College of Medicine as the 2020 Professor of the Year. According to The Ohio State University, "The Professor of the Year Award has been awarded each year since 1931 by the graduating class of The Ohio State University College of Medicine to a faculty member who has demonstrated excellence and commitment to teaching and in mentoring and serving as a role model to the class. This once-in-a-lifetime award is the highest honor that a faculty member can earn from the graduating class. The Professor of the Year is invited to address the class at the hooding ceremony." Dr. Fernandes delivered a "secularized version" of this address on April 30, 2020, "virtually," and has modified his commencement address for our Catholic medical students as they begin their vocations in this most sacred vocation of healing.

Summary: Dr. Ashley Fernandes addresses the newly graduating medical students of the Catholic Medical Association in a "virtual convocation speech" that implores them to remember the power and nature of medical profession itself; to be the person they ought to be through the exercise of the integrity and humility; and to remember whom they serve—God first, and then, the invaluable human person, made in His image.

Keywords

Catholic identity in health care, Conscience in medicine, Dignity of the human person, Humanism in medicine, Philosophy of medicine, Professionalism

To the Catholic Medical Association (CMA) leadership, faculty, community physicians, parents, loved ones, and most importantly, the CMA medical school graduates of 2020, thank-you so much for the honor of addressing you today, during these *truly* remarkable times. The CMA wishes to express our sincere and profound gratitude and congratulations to the Class of 2020. You have attended our Boot Camps and national conferences, bringing joy to those around you; you have reshaped our organization with your prayers and energy; you have walked bravely "among

[1] Center for Bioethics, The Ohio State University College of Medicine, Columbus, OH, USA
[2] Nationwide Children's Hospital, The Ohio State University College of Medicine, Columbus, OH, USA

Corresponding Author:
Ashley K. Fernandes, MD, PhD, FAAP, FACP, Center for Bioethics, The Ohio State University College of Medicine, 2190 Graves Hall, Columbus, OH 43210, USA.
Email: ashleykfernandes@yahoo.com

wolves"; and through your courage, you have inspired us and been witnesses to the great culture of life. Your individual resolve, strength, and acceptance of sacrifice in adapting to the coronavirus crisis and being the first young graduates to face this pandemic has only brought this point home for all of us in the CMA community—Jesus Christ has chosen *you*, *now*, for this time, to unceasingly bear the light of truth to the sick and to all your colleagues in the medical profession.

Allow me to first address your mentors and exemplars in the CMA, many of whom mentored me as a medical student and continue to do so now. To all the members of the CMA, *let us be, in attitude and action, examples for the young*.

Remember that as Catholic physicians, we believe that human persons and their dignity are the "visible image of the invisible God," on which all goodness in the created world is measured. Disease and death on a pandemic scale remind us of life's fragility, and the societal response reminds us ever sharply of the preexistent threats against the dignity of persons and the *temptation to depersonalize*. Coronavirus has forced our very faces behind masks; it has renewed calls for assisted suicide and euthanasia; it has distanced us from even the physical touching of patients, so vital to our calling; it has brought fear and self-interest forward in clinical practice; it has created conditions of economic sacrifice that imperil our livelihood and those of our most vulnerable patients; and it has removed for many the ability to receive Communion and pray together in community—our spiritual lifeblood.

But, lest "social distancing" and fear distance us from *persons themselves*, we as Catholic healthcare workers must recall Matthew 14:25–32 and have courage:

> When the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified. "It is a ghost," they said, and they cried out in fear. At once [Jesus] spoke to them, "*Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid*." Peter said to him in reply, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw how [strong] the wind was he became frightened; and, beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?

Yet today, we must be like St. Peter. The world is dark and stormy. Those in the boat with him are afraid. And Peter sees the Lord and with courage, hope, love, and faith in the Lord, he steps out into that world of uncertainty. It is not a sin that he was afraid of, for if fear made him lose faith, how much more poignant and redeeming is the moment when he cries out, "Lord save me!" And Christ, in his patience and love, "immediately" hears his prayer and answers him in a very direct way.

In this special issue of the *Linacre* itself, devoted to depersonalization and a Catholic answer to it, we would be wise to recall Pope St. John Paul II's 1983 address to the World Medical Association, in which he implores:

> It is important that we do not isolate the technical problem posed by the treatment of a specific illness from the attention paid to the person of the patient in all his aspects. . . . At least you should unceasingly make the effort to keep in mind the profound unity of the human being, in the evident interaction of all his bodily functions, but also in the unity of his bodily, affective, intellectual and spiritual dimensions.

The sanctity of each human person cannot be eclipsed by any disease—at the very least, *not by us*. A person, Pope St. John Paul II teaches, is the kind of being who thinks (has a rational nature), acts (morally), loves selflessly, and lives in solidarity with another. Our task today remains to care for and heal the person in all of these aspects, and that will require a *special creativity* that is driven by faith, hope, and charity. Can we "live in solidarity" with another person from behind a mask and layers of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)? Can those who die alone in an intensive care bed or nursing home, separated from family, know they are loved? Can spiritual communion and a deepening of prayer life when we are not permitted to gather for Mass, still sustain us now in this mission—as it has in so many Christian centuries before? I believe the answer to those questions must be yes. *Creativity needs grace in order to overcome fear*, and the Catholic healthcare professional must beg for this grace and wisdom. In this way, we are better armed than our secular peers for the hard way forward. Only in this way, by grasping for the hand of Christ in the stormy sea, can we be an example to these young graduates who will need us.

And now to the graduates of the Class of 2020, please bear with me and allow me to impart to you three simple things that I hope you will remember as you go forward in your careers.

First, *remember the power and nobility of what you have accomplished.* Being a doctor is coveted and admired in every country and culture in the world. Being around amazingly brilliant people for the last four years can make you forget—*not everyone who wants to be a doctor gets to be a doctor. But you do*. Congratulations!

So to all of you out there who tried more than once to get into medical school—you made it. To those that always felt like an imposter, surrounded by everyone who was smarter than you—you made it. To those who were the first ones from your family to go to college—let alone professional school; who came from the farms, small towns, and the inner cities no one thought you could leave—you made it. And to those who suffered for your Christian beliefs in medical school, who felt alone, were mocked, were socially isolated—you also made it, for Christ said "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven" (Matthew 5:11–12).

You have now achieved the ability to harness the immense power of science and cultivate and channel it for the betterment of your patient. You have achieved the skills to ethically and compassionately manage complex illness in patients not yet born; in patients who cannot yet speak; in patients who speak, but not in your language; in patients who speak but are not listened to by anyone but you; and in patients who, at the end of their days, need another to speak for them. No mere "intellectual" can do these things. And doing such things will have a cost.

Medicine is that profession in which we can never ever judge the worthiness of another in the application of our skill. A business owner can say that if you do not wear shoes, you cannot enter. But we take care of the shoeless, the homeless, the prisoner who shot an officer, and the officer himself with equal intellect and technical skill. This is no ordinary task. When society runs from the sick or the disabled—perhaps a natural or evolutionary instinct—we defy reason and instinct and run toward them. Our faith and our unfailing belief in the dignity of the suffering person, compel us to do so. That is the core of why your profession is noble. But, as we have seen in this crisis, it will exact a price.

Remember who you are called to be. St. Francis de Sales said "Be who you are, and be that well." But I would say "Be who you *ought to be*, and be that well." For the two most important virtues you can have in your careers in medicine are *integrity and humility*, the two virtues that will guide you to being who you ought to be (notice, acing The Boards is not on the list).

Integrity, from the Latin "to make whole," suggests a deep sense of wellness of mind, body, and spirit. You must take care of yourselves in mind and body, both in this pandemic you are entering and beyond. Your patients will take from you, but they will also give—they will give you the joys of accomplishment and success, but also the joy of curing the sick, and when you cannot cure, knowing you played a part in the palliation of suffering. But there is more than this. Integrity means also a *moral integrity* that comes from the spirit. For we know as Catholics that a doctor is not a mere technician. A doctor too is a moral being, forming a covenant with a patient who conveys trust with the vulnerable. Never forget—patients, practices, hospital systems, cultures, and societies will ask you to do things you know will not help your patient. There is an increasing assault on your ability to be free to choose the right. This seems almost too simplistic to say—but *never do what your conscience tells you is wrong*.

Humility, that other virtue, is a reminder that the source of all our success, the source of all the goodness we can impart with intellect and technical skill, is The Good Shepherd, That Man, who left the ninety-nine others to find you, and call you by name. Who are we, then? And what must we always be when faced with the suffering person we are called to heal? In residency and beyond, we must know that we can always learn from others, we can always see things in a new light from our faculty mentors and, of course, from our patients. We must see in them the suffering Christ; that He has brought us to a place of power and now asks—in the face of our sick patient—"*will you also serve Me now*?" St. Padre Pio said that "holiness means living humbly." And, at the end of the day, approaching this incredible accomplishment you have achieved today with a sense of deep humility and integrity will show you the path to being who you ought to be and being that well.

Finally, *remember whom you are called to serve.* As Catholic Christians and new physicians, you must serve God first, for the practice of medicine will reveal to you *both the source and the object* of your sacred gift of healing and the truly miraculous dignity of human life He has created. But where you can also make a difference is in bringing the Catholic and the secular anthropologies together, for (to paraphrase Pope St. John Paul II) "where a border exists, there is also a meeting place." It is where the religious and nonreligious can come together is in our steadfast commitment to the human person, in whose

service we will always be engaged. Medicine has always tried, albeit at times imperfectly, to do this. The Hippocratic Oath you will or have taken should remind you—it was not always so. Once, there was a time where a patient did not know whether a doctor would take life or preserve it, whether a doctor would reveal secrets or keep them, and whether a doctor would work in the patient's best interests or those of another.

Now, perhaps more than ever, your devotion to the original spirit of the Hippocratic Oath is essential if medicine is to survive within a culture increasingly obsessed with death. Like Jesus Christ and the Church in every age, you, my young physicians, must be a *sign of contradiction*, but not merely for yourselves. Remember, you were not called to the service of those who have everything together, to those who will *tell you* what they need from you. You stand (virtually) on this graduation stage for the migrant who is terrified to come to the doctor, for the opioid addicted person who has cut all family ties and lives in social and cultural isolation, for the persons who do not appreciate your sacrifice because of the burden of suffering they themselves bear. *Do not forget the Christ whom you serve—not above—but in each of "the least of these."*

Throughout history, our profession has never been perfect. In times of plague, good doctors died while the unscrupulous fled and lived; in times of war and the Holocaust, doctors murdered the vulnerable and sacrificed the good of the person for that of the state; racism and prejudice—from Tuskegee to the AIDS crisis—have sometimes eclipsed the person we were called to serve. But eventually, medicine showed, as it always does, *not just its power but also its grace*. And Catholic Christian physicians in every age have led that effort.

Our prayer for you now is to *be that instrument of grace for us*. In this time of pandemic, to paraphrase Shakespeare in Henry V, "We few, we happy few," need you more than ever. Never in a century has the graduation of Catholic medical students meant so much. Never in a century has the CMA—or the profession of medicine itself—needed you more. For the poor, the sick, the dying, the elderly, the unborn, the disabled, the abused and trafficked, the addicted, and all those who suffer, you are the new knights, the new army, the protectors, the servants of Jesus in the defenseless person. It is up to you now to remind the world of the beauty of this human person. We, the members of the CMA, congratulate you, will pray for you, and will be with you in whatever way we can. *Oremus Pro Invicem!*

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ORCID iD

Ashley K. Fernandes, MD, PhD, FAAP, FACP
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8376-0544

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Biographical Note

Ashley K. Fernandes, MD, PhD, is the associate Director for the Center for Bioethics and an associate clinical professor of Pediatrics at The Ohio State University College of Medicine/Nationwide Children's Hospital. He is a fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the American College of Pediatricians (ACP), and is an elected member of the AAP's Executive Committee on Bioethics. A member of the Catholic Medical Association since his first year of medical school, he was the winner of the national Patrick Guinan Physician Mentorship Award presented by the CMA Student Section (2015), and is an active member of the CMA's national speaker board.