

Ashley Fernandes to speak at White Mass on Virtues in Medicine

FORT WAYNE — The White Mass will be celebrated by Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades for all area medical professionals on Oct. 20 at 6 p.m. at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Fort Wayne. A dinner reception will follow at St. Mary's Church with featured speaker Pediatrician and Bioethics Professor Ashley K. Fernandes, who will speak on "Reclaiming the Medical Culture." The White Mass is sponsored by the Catholic Medical Guild of Northeast Indiana. Today's Catholic recently interviewed Dr. Fernandes.

TC: How did you decide to become a pediatrician?

Dr. Fernandes: I decided to become a pediatrician because I really felt drawn to heal the suffering of children, whose voice grows with every stage of development. While all patients are vulnerable, the child who needs a doctor is particularly fragile. My passion for education fed easily into the duty to provide every parent with the anticipatory guidance and confidence they need to raise healthy children. It was Frederick Douglass who said, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men."

TC: Please provide a brief biography.

Dr. Fernandes: I am the associate director of the Center for Bioethics at The Ohio State University College of Medicine, and an associate professor of pediatrics at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus Ohio. I attended the University of Toledo, graduating in 1994 with two degrees, in philosophy and biology. I received a master's in philosophy from Johns Hopkins University (1999); an MD from The Ohio State University (2003); and a PhD in philosophy (bioethics) from Georgetown University (2008). I have been a member of the Catholic Medical Association since medical school. I am an advisor to the CMA Medical Student Section, and a member of the national CMA Speaker's Bureau. I am of Indian descent, my father (a physician) and mother (an educator), having emigrated from Mumbai, India, before I was born. I have four brothers: two physicians, one magistrate (and deacon), and one a Roman Catholic priest (and dean of the seminary in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati). I became active in the pro-life cause in high school, organizing local student-run rallies for life. I am now on the Board of

Trustees of Ohio Right to Life, and have testified before the state legislature as well as provided expert testimony in bioethics for legal cases supporting the culture of life. My wife Shruti (a family physician) and I raise two rambunctious boys in Hilliard, Ohio.

TC: It appears you come from a family of physicians who have a commitment to the Catholic faith. How does your faith play a role in your profession?

Dr. Fernandes: Faith is inseparable from vocation. Whether that is as a parent or as a physician, faith animates everything, gives it purpose, helps what you do to have meaning for yourself and those you serve. When we act in truth — in my case as a physician for children or a teacher for students — we perfect our being and become closer to the person God calls us to be. Secularists in the culture want us to “leave our religion at the door” when we put on the white coat. To the Christian, however, Jesus must be central to everything we do — whether that is caring for poor, or protecting the sanctity of all human life. Faith in medicine gives us a radically different perspective than the secular world on everything from unborn human life to human suffering to social justice, and in my view, one we should not be ashamed of, because our view is simply better.

TC: Please share a few sentences about your involvement with the Ohio Right to Life.

Dr. Fernandes: I have been a president’s trustee of Ohio Right to Life since 2011. We are arguably the most successful grass-roots pro-life organization run at the state level. We have passed legislation which redirected funds from Planned Parenthood, and this year —are working to pass bans on abortion for Down syndrome children, as well as a pain-capable abortion ban. ORTL utilizes a smart strategy of lobbying for incremental changes in law, which propel attitudinal change; we will not stop until the abortion business is eliminated. My role is to act for them, when I can, as an educational advisor on medical issues, and, if called upon, to deliver testimony or guidance to legislators at their behest.

TC: How do you encourage others in the medical profession to respect life at all stages?

Dr. Fernandes: Studies suggest that the way medical students and residents learn professionalism is through the observation and guidance of their teachers. Be the physician that sees the disabled patient, the poor patient, the patient that comes late, the patient that smells, the patient with Down syndrome, the gay or lesbian patient, the patient who has just had her third abortion. Treating every person as a child of God has an impact on yourself, but also on those around you. Try to be the best you can be, to work up to the talents which God has given you — but then also be prepared to speak up. And by that I mean, when physicians harm human life or disrespect the inherent dignity of others, they need to be challenged.

TC: Please share the importance of Catholic medical associations for those in your profession?

Dr. Fernandes: Being an authentic, believing Catholic — despite the massive crowds around the recent visit of Pope Francis — is truly countercultural. And it certainly is in science and medicine. There are clinicians and academics in my field who hate Catholicism — literally — if you uphold the Church’s teachings on abortion, contraception and traditional marriage. Therefore, for physicians, residents, students, anyone in healthcare interested in joining a group who is unashamed to defend the Church and promote a positive, life-giving message of medicine in the culture — join and support the Catholic Medical Association. Many cities such as Indianapolis, Fort Wayne and others — have local “guilds,” which provide networks of support and spiritual strength. Visit www.cathmed.org for more information.

TC: What will you speak about at the White Mass dinner?

Dr. Fernandes: At the White Mass dinner, I hope to be able to convey the importance and meaning of the virtue of courage in medicine. This is a version of an address I gave at the national Catholic Medical Association conference last year in Orlando. I hope to critically evaluate post-modern conceptions of bioethics and the relationship to the human person, in light of an authentic Catholic philosophical anthropology. I will apply a Catholic framework to specific practical solutions for reinvigorating the profession of medicine, focusing on the virtues. I encourage any Catholic — in medicine or not — to attend, support the local CMA guild, and pray for strength for your brothers and sisters in the medical field.

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