

The Catholic Doctor Is In: My Friend Matthew

A few months ago my friend and patient Matthew passed away. He died at the tender age of 29. He was bright, funny, compassionate and loving. He lived his whole life under the shadow of illness and the threat of death, but he was never without a kind word, a smile or a fervent hope in his Savior.

Matt had Down syndrome. He lived a full life: he went to work, he had a girlfriend, he loved grandma's cooking and he snuck extra dessert. He got upset with me (when I counseled him about his diet); he got sad when he had to stay in the hospital another day; he got scared when it was time for another surgery or test.

With his quiet faith and gentle demeanor he never left anyone poorer for having met him. Matthew talked openly about his friend Jesus. Far from being a burden or source of sadness, he was a source of joy to me, to his family and all whom he met. He showed me the face of Christ.

The patron of our local Catholic medical association guild is Jerome Lejeune. He was a French pediatrician and a brilliant scientist. Until the time of Dr. Lejeune, there was a great social stigma to having a child with Down syndrome. It was believed that the illness was caused by one of the parents having a sexually transmitted disease (syphilis). Dr. Lejeune demonstrated that it was an abnormality of DNA, not syphilis, that caused Down syndrome. He spent hours with children and their families providing information, comfort and hope. Lejeune saw each child as a gift, a wonder of creation regardless of disability or illness. He demonstrated the authentic mission of healthcare: to uphold the dignity of every human being from conception to natural death.

This perspective put him directly at odds with the French government and the scientific community. They saw his discovery as a way to screen for and selectively abort children with Down syndrome, thereby ridding the world of one disease. Lejeune vigorously opposed these proponents of death. In doing so, he incited the wrath of the French government and the scientific community. Indeed, patients with Down syndrome were labeled "Lejeune's monsters." He was denied any accolades for his research and he was shunned by the scientific community. Later in life, he developed a close friendship with St. John Paul II and became the first head of the Pontifical Council for Life only weeks before his death from cancer in 1994.

My patient Matthew and Dr. Lejeune had much in common: they were gentle, joyful and faithful. They both went out to meet the Lord with quiet resolution and with dignity and

hope. They provided examples of heroic virtue and endurance of suffering for the truth. They both showed me that there is much yet to be done.

Indeed, 92 percent of all babies who are diagnosed with Down syndrome are destroyed within their mother's womb. Those that are born, face constant struggles with access to care, pity rather than compassion and a culture eager to rid itself of perceived imperfection. Our challenge in building the culture of life could never be simpler or clearer. Uphold the dignity of each life from conception to natural death. Regard those with disabilities as wonders of creation, not burdens. See the face of Jesus in everyone we meet and, in return, show them His loving face.

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