

Virtues of medicine emphasized at White Mass in Fort Wayne

Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades on Oct. 20 celebrated the annual White Mass for area medical professionals at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Fort Wayne. A buffet reception followed at nearby St. Mary, Mother of God Catholic Church with pediatrician and bioethics professor Dr. Ashley K. Fernandes speaking on “Reclaiming the Medical Culture.” The diocese and the Dr. Jerome Lejeune Catholic Medical Guild of Northeast Indiana sponsored the White Mass and dinner.

“I was thinking about how the sick come to you who serve in the medical profession with hope, hope for a promising diagnosis, hope for healing and a cure, hope for relief of pain, hope for good news about their physical condition,” Bishop Rhoades said in his homily. “Sometimes you are able to give them good news. What a joy that is for you. To tell a person that a tumor is benign, that a condition can be successfully treated, that a suspected terminal illness is not really terminal, that a person’s pain can be alleviated.”

“In such situations, you are truly messengers of hope,” he continued. “This must be such a fulfilling part of your profession.”

He also spoke of the situation where the news doctors give their patients is not good news. In these situations, it is very difficult to be a messenger of hope.

“When you have to tell a patient that his or her condition is not curable, that a tumor has metastasized, that surgery is not possible or is futile, that treatment will not bring a cure or may not even extend life, that it will be difficult to alleviate their pain. It is incredibly difficult to be the bearer of such bad news,” Bishop Rhoades stressed. “But yet, as Christian doctors and healthcare professionals, you are still called to be messengers of hope, not primarily through your words, but through your deeds, your loving concern, your compassion and sensitivity, your help of a patient in a state of anguish or even despair. As disciples of Jesus, we have hope even in the face of death.”

Bishop Rhoades reminded the congregation that on Oct. 5, California became the fifth state to legalize euthanasia. And, like abortion and suicide, euthanasia reveals a culture not only of death, but also of despair.

“At its root, we see what I believe is not only a refusal of love of neighbor or oneself, but a refusal to hope,” Bishop Rhoades added. “We have a crisis of hope in our culture. Perhaps this is most obvious in the face of the acceptance of euthanasia.”

“Never underestimate the confidence and hope you give to your patients who are dying, just by your caring attention,” he emphasized. “You can help a patient whom you inform of a terminal condition or whom you accompany in the final weeks of life in such a way that their anguish gives way to hope, not despair.”

Bishop Rhoades concluded his homily, “My brothers and sisters, it is your indispensable and holy mission to defend, promote and love the life of every patient, of every human being from its beginning until its natural end. May you have the faith and courage to live this mission and to be messengers and witnesses of hope to all whom you care for. May the Holy Spirit guide you in your work and help you to bear witness that human life is always sacred!”

Dr. Fernandes said he was going to talk about truth in his talk at St. Mary’s, which followed the White Mass. Quoting a popular comment made concerning the climate of religion and ethics in medicine today, he read: “Do not confuse religion with ethics. They are completely separate. One need not have religion to be an ethical person and your religion should not be a factor in the decisions you make in your job. If religion comes into play at all, it is the healthcare recipient whose religion matters, not yours. Ethics put forth by your professional association may still put you in conflict with a patient but religion drives only the choices for your own personal healthcare, not for the people you are serving.”

“And that just about encapsulates the attitude of medical education today as any medical student in a secular, public university or not will tell you,” Dr. Fernandes said.

“So we have a big problem as the culture of death seems to march on,” he emphasized. “The issue is what are we going to do about it and where are we going to draw strength from.”

“It’s not over! ‘Reclaiming the Medical Profession’ is a provocative title. The idea that Catholic physicians are reclaiming rather than discovering or conquering implies that the foundation of bioethics was first owned by us and somehow surrendered,” Dr. Fernandes said.

“To be ethical in medicine depends upon people acting ethically in the practice of medicine,” he added. Catholic physicians were the first to found hospitals and hospices, and really change the nature of medicine, he explained.

“It was Catholicism. It was Christianity that really changed medicine into a discipline which was meant to heal,” Dr. Fernandes said. “Why? Because everyone was created into the image and likeness of God. But now we have lost our moral foundations. And if that is the case it is something every single person in this audience, whether you are a physician or not — if you are a spouse, a child, a doctor or not a doctor, priest or clergy — you must work with us to reclaim and repair. We need priests ... and religious people to strengthen us in faith. And we need each other. It is this moral foundation that we have to focus on.”

Dr. Fernandes continued to address a “being problem” that has to do with a person in conscience, a “thinking problem” that has to do with moral relativism and a “doing problem” in medicine that has to do with apathy. And these problems all overlap he later stressed. To renew the culture one must know his or her faith, to study it, answer questions intelligently and feel the faith, letting it animate them through prayer. We have to live the faith, he emphasized.

“We evangelize through our being, through our acts. ... We have to make Catholicism attractive, not sour, not angry and not bitter,” he said. “We have to be nice — really, really nice!”

Dr. Fernandes said the secret weapon is truth — and truth with a smile. The faith, he said, is not the thing that binds; it’s the thing that loves and frees.

“Catholic faith creates hope where there is none,” he added. “We have to have the courage to be a light for ourselves, our families and for others,” Dr. Fernandes concluded. “We have to be prepared to stand alone and know that we are not alone.”

Reprinted with permission from Today's Catholic newspaper, Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend.