

“Health Care as Art: Goodness and Beauty Leading to the Truth”
Sermon – White Mass for CMA Annual Educational Conference
September 26, 2020

Introduction: the *Advocata*

On a visit to Rome back in January of 2019, I had the opportunity to venerate an ancient but long-hidden icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary known as the “*Advocata*,” which is tucked away in a cloistered Dominican convent on the top of Monte Mario. There is little known of this icon; there aren’t even any reprints of it for sale on the internet. It has been, essentially, kept secret, in comparison to other well-known Marian icons.

Legend has it that St. Luke painted this image of Mary. While solid historical evidence for this may be lacking, its origin is certainly ancient; science, in fact, tells us that this precious icon is the oldest painted image of Our Lady.

St. Luke: Physician, Artist, Evangelist

That St. Luke was an artist is a long-standing tradition in the Church. But as you know well, he was not only an artist. We have evidence from Scripture itself that he was also a physician, as we read in St. Paul’s letter to the Colossians, toward the end of the Epistle where he gives greetings from his co-workers: “Luke the beloved physician sends greetings, as does Demas” (Col 4:14).

Artist and physician. Think about that. Art and science. To our contemporary way of thinking, these are two separate, different endeavors of the human spirit. Science, after all, is empirical, it is measured and exact, and so it assures a certain reliability. Art, on the other hand, while it observes certain objective guiding principles, brings in the dimension of intuition, inspiration and spontaneity. This allows for much more room for creativity, but it is less exact.

Everything pertaining to the field of health care is now seen as belonging to the silo of science. But up until not very long ago the care of sick people was considered an art – the “*medical arts*.” While medical research fits much more in the area of science, I would hazard to guess that those of you who have a medical practice in tending to the sick would understand why the delivery of health care is really the meeting point of art and science: to attend to a sick *person*, and not just the person’s disease, requires the intuitive, affective part of our human nature. I remember as a young priest when I made hospital visits, how impressed I was at the personal care the nurses gave to the patients while the doctors, who were accomplished specialists in their field, did not have that regular contact and so did not really know the patients. Because the nurses knew the patients so well, they sometimes were in a better position to know what and how much medication they really needed.

This human face, the “artistic side” of health care, if you will, leads us to another fact about St. Luke, the most important and notable of all: he was an evangelist. All he did was for the proclamation of the Gospel. He was a physician *and* an artist *and* an evangelist, thus speaking to us of how the Church is to proclaim the Gospel, and has proclaimed the Gospel, down through the ages: goodness, beauty and truth. We need all three, for most people don’t come to the truth directly (i.e., the Gospel); they need an alternative path to get there, and those paths are goodness and beauty.

Caring for the sick has always been preeminent in the Church’s pursuit of the path of goodness. It has been intrinsic to the proclamation of the Gospel from the very beginning, not only in the healings worked by Our Lord himself, but also by the apostles who carried on his work after he returned to his Father in glory. And he prepared his band of disciples for this as he was forming them to carry on his mission. St. Luke also tells us that he gave them this

commandment in sending them out ahead of him: “The Lord Jesus appointed seventy-two disciples whom he sent ahead of him in pairs to every town and place he intended to visit. He said to them . . . : ‘Whatever town you enter and they welcome you, eat what is set before you, cure the sick in it and say to them, “The Kingdom of God is at hand for you.”’” The Church even has a special sacrament for the sick. She does not have a sacrament for people suffering other forms of distress – the homeless, the unemployed, the poor, the disabled – but for the sick, yes, so integral is their care to the proclamation of the Gospel and the Church’s sacramental vision of all reality.

Salus Populi Romani

Goodness and beauty are the two paths that lead to the truth, and the paths converge in another image of Our Lady said to have been painted by St. Luke, the much better known *Salus Populi Romani* (the health, or salvation, or well-being, of the people of Rome). Legend has it that after the Crucifixion, when Our Lady moved to the home of St. John, she took with her a few personal belongings, among which was a table built by Our Lord in his foster father’s workshop. Pious virgins of Jerusalem prevailed upon St. Luke to paint a portrait of the Mother of God, and it was the top of this table that he used to do so. While applying his brush and paints, he listened carefully as Mary spoke of the life of her Son, which the evangelist then used later in recording his Gospel – which accounts for the centrality of Mary in his infancy narrative.

Our Lady is depicted in this icon with her Son resting on her left arm and looking up at her, with his right arm slightly raised in blessing and his left hand holding the Book of the Gospels – the same position as in the depictions of him as Pantocrator, the King and Ruler of the Universe, both blessing and judging, forgiving and holding accountable, both Savior and Judge. Mary here is depicted as the woman who looks to the people, drawing them with her gaze to center on her divine Son.

The image is a whole lesson in theology, but also – very relevant to us, with what we are suffering in the world today – it has also been venerated as a miraculous image. The well-known story is that during the pontificate of St. Gregory the Great (590-604) a plague viciously attacked the people of Rome, killing entire families. Pope Gregory fervently prayed to the Blessed Mother, and during the Easter festivals, as he carried her image in solemn procession, upon arriving at Hadrian’s Mausoleum an angelic choir was heard singing the joyful Resurrection hymn “Regina coeli” (Queen of heaven, rejoice). St. Gregory then immediately added the exclamation now commonly prayed at the end of the Regina coeli: “Pray for us to God.” Then, at that moment, the Archangel Michael appeared above Hadrian’s Mausoleum, replacing in his scabbard the sword of vengeance which he had held over the city. To this day that Mausoleum is better known by the name *Castel Sant’Angelo* (Castle of the Holy Angel).

As Christians did then, and in every age, so we too, now, turn to her in this time of plague, begging her to intercede to her Son for us as she constantly directs us back to him. But we ask her protection not only from physical illness; we also ask protection from the attacks of the evil one. Pope Francis reminded us of this in his homily for Mass on the Occasion of the Festival of the Translation of the Image of the *Salus Populi Romani* to its present location in the Borghese Chapel of the Basilica of St. Mary Major this past January: “When the Virgin [Mary] is at home, the devil does not enter. Where the Mother is present, worry does not prevail, fear does not prevail. . . . It will not be ideas or technology that will give us comfort and hope, but the face of the Mother, her hands caressing life, her mantle that shelters us. Let us learn to find refuge, going every day to the Mother.”

The Centrality of Prayer

How do we learn this lesson, so that the devil may not enter? St. Luke himself gives us the answer, where he tells us that the Lord “told his disciples a parable about *the necessity for them to pray always without becoming weary*” – the parable of the persistent widow who keeps badgering the judge until the judge finally gives in and heeds her request.

Now, to “pray always” doesn’t mean we must spend all day, every day, in church. “Always” here means to pray in the sense of praying diligently or frequently or persistently. We use that sort of poetic exaggeration in our own colloquial speech, such as, “he’s always complaining” or, “she’s always watching television.” We know this is not meant in the literal sense. That’s what the “always” means in “to pray always”, to pray persistently, but the “pray” also means more than time alone communicating with God, although that for sure is the essence of it. Anything done for the glory of God, especially properly motivated acts of charity, can be considered a form of prayer.

Doing all for the glory of God: that is how we combat the incursions of the evil one, who makes his presence felt in the world, seemingly increasingly so, especially in the field of health care – no surprise, given how it so often involves questions of human dignity at its very core level. The Church has always understood the reality of spiritual warfare, and that we must be on guard and strengthen ourselves spiritually to resist the temptations of the devil. In one of his sermons, Pope St. Gregory the Great said the following: “To advance against the foe involves a bold resistance to the powers of this world in defense of the flock. To stand fast in battle on the day of the Lord means to oppose the wicked enemy out of love for what is right.” So, yes, let’s not fool ourselves: each of us is in a struggle – in combat, if you will – for our own soul, fighting to overcome the forces of evil, temptation, mediocrity, moral compromise. Anyone who sincerely strives to make progress on the path of self-perfection knows this, and experiences it.

Notice, though, how St. Luke completes the sentence with which he introduces the parable: “... a parable about the necessity for them to pray always *without becoming weary*.” We become weary if we are inclined to stop praying because we do not feel the effect: not sensing the inner peace we are seeking; not growing in virtue such as becoming more patient, or curbing bad habits such as gossiping; not perceiving an answer to our prayers such that there seems to be no improvement in what we are praying for; not sensing a greater presence of God or deeper spiritual experience.

However, when we approach prayer with this mentality, we are doing so on our own terms, not God’s, expecting God to act in a certain way and according to our own timetable. This means we pray in order to “get something out of it” – essentially, giving to get. And this is diametrically opposed to the Christian spirit, is it not? But if we pray simply because we love God, then we will not become weary. When you really love someone, you naturally want to be with that person. You don’t spend time with them in order to get them to do something for you – that is, if you truly love them. Rather, you simply want to be in their presence.

Praying in order to “get something out of it” is a trick of the evil one. He wants us to grow weary and give up praying, because – one might say – if you don’t pray, you are easy prey. That is why what we are doing in these days is so critically important, for we cannot persevere in prayer, we cannot be persistent in living our faith with integrity, all on our own: it can only happen if we keep communion with the Church. Professional associations such as the Catholic Medical Association assist our Catholic lay faithful to live their faith with integrity and bring the values of the Gospel into their places of work, thus supporting them in being evangelizers “in the marketplace,” as they say. In addition to the communion you share in your Catholic faith, you also share a fellowship in the work to which you have committed your lives; professional associations such as the CMA help to strengthen those bonds of communion. In the end, it is only within the communion of the Church – being observant and diligent in our religious duties,

in fellowship with our fellow believers, in keeping the faith intact as it has been handed down to us through the Church – that we can persevere in prayer without growing weary.

Conclusion: Guided to the Gospel of Her Son

We come together to pray now, offering the Church's greatest prayer, in this Votive Mass of the Blessed Virgin Mary. We turn to her, our advocate, the *Advocata*. What does this mean? "Ad-vocare" means, literally, to call toward or to summon. She always calls us toward her Son, Redeemer and Judge, as she did to the people of Rome 1400 years ago and continues to do so today, as we are reminded in the *Salus Populi Romani*. Strengthened by prayer, and bringing together the paths of goodness and beauty as you practice the medical arts, may she be your advocate to help you guide your patients and coworkers through those paths to the goodness, beauty and truth of the Gospel of her Son.