“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you.”

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

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White Mass
St. Thomas Aquinas Newman Center, Grand Forks

“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you.”
Friends, thank you for being here for this annual White Mass, which is offered for all our health care professionals and students in the health sciences. I know how full your lives are, so I’m grateful that you’ve taken the time to come together for this Mass and gathering.

“Not as the world gives do I give it to you.” Jesus is speaking to his disciples on the night before he died, and he is trying to help them understand what is about to happen. He will be taken from them, violently, and they will be confronted by the power of evil in this world. But he reassures them that the evil one has no power over him, and he cannot be conquered. Yes, they will face challenges and conflict, and yes temptation too. But in him they will be secure, in him they will have peace, because he loves the Father and follows his commands. In other words, he offers them peace, not the peace of this world, but the peace of life in the arms of God.

We all know that the world claims to want peace, and it offers peace in lots of different ways. Eliminate conflict, poverty, suffering, restraints on freedom, etc. And in the medical field, there is always the desire and the effort to eliminate illness and suffering. I think it’s safe to say that medical professionals desire peace and contentment for their patients, right?

But the road to peace has become rocky and twisted in a lot of ways, even in the world of medicine. A distorted notion of peace has taken hold, and now we’re offering peace through euthanasia, or through selective embryo reduction, or through gender reassignment surgery. We’re using any means to satisfy the wants of patients, even when these are objectively disordered. Healthcare in many ways has embraced a concept of peace that is temporary, and inadequate to the real needs of those who are treated.

And this is why all of you are so important. You bring a different, Christ-centered vision to the work of health care. You recognize that some means are never justified, and you believe in a different kind of peace than what the world wants to give. You recognize that Jesus came to redeem us by his incarnation, his life on this earth, his death and resurrection. He lived a human life and he reached out in compassion to those who suffered. He relieved suffering and healed many from their physical maladies, but ultimately he healed all of us by his own suffering and death. Jesus wasn’t interested in a quick and easy fix, and he certainly didn’t conform to the culture of his time. He conformed rather to God’s plan, a plan for holiness and salvation that would be lasting and eternal. He offered peace that the world cannot give, and peace that acknowledges the eternal destiny of every person.

Pope Francis recently spoke to a group of oncologists, and he challenged them to resist the push for euthanasia and assisted suicide that has gained steam in the developed world. As he so often does, he encouraged them to adopt a spirit of accompaniment with those they treat, a willingness to walk with them on their journey, even if it’s the final stage of the journey. He encouraged them especially to share the spirit of hope that inspires all who believe in Christ. Jesus gives hope to all of us by his acceptance of suffering and his triumph over death. He gives us hope by assuring us that we are not alone. And he calls us to be agents of hope and authentic peace for those who are suffering illness or even facing death. Rather than offering a false peace, he calls us to the kind of peace that God desires for all his children.

I don’t have any doubt that you all embrace this vision of compassion that Pope Francis speaks of. Your presence here is a testament to your reverence for the sick, and your belief in the sacredness of life. I only encourage you to live this reverence actively in your work, and to be a leaven for others who perhaps would offer a different kind of peace to those they serve. Your witness, your offering of a more
authentic peace can be a profound influence on your confreres, who I’m sure want to do what they can to serve their patients and help them in any way possible.

I believe those who are seriously or terminally ill often seek disordered remedies because they think that’s their only choice. It’s easy to become desperate when you are struggling and believe that you are alone, or that no one is there for you. But your work, when it is in communion with the redeeming work of Christ, can reassure the sick person that they have value and dignity, no matter what illness or malady they suffer from. You can assure them that they are not alone, they are not a burden, they are not a waste. You can assure them, even in a tacit way, that they still matter in this world, and you can extend to them the gift of peace that Jesus offers to all God’s children.