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One might wonder, “Why would a physician, who has practiced medicine for over 35 years in the United States, decide to study full-time at the Franciscan School of Theology for two years, and write a thesis about St. Francis of Assisi’s influence on health care today?” It has been my great privilege to be that physician, and from my work at FST, I strive to link observations and concerns from my experience as a physician, together with a potential Franciscan response to some of those concerns. That response is drawn from the message of beauty, joy, and Goodness, that can be found in the Franciscan tradition’s approach to the care of the sick.

As a physician I have practiced both family medicine and psychiatry in many different health care settings, including community clinics, a U.S. Naval Hospital, the Indian Health Service, and University Health Centers. For over 25 years, I have had the honor of teaching medical students and resident physicians as they trained in both family medicine and psychiatry, and doing so in a free clinic that exclusively served the homeless and those who live in poverty. In all of the health care settings in which I have served, but especially in the free clinic, the words of Dr. Daniel Sulmasy ring true:

To be a healer is to find God in those in need of healing. For the Christian,
healing is a direct encounter with the divine.¹

When seen this way, the care of the sick is not tiring, and it certainly is not boring. The labor can continue with compassion, which in turn refreshes the health care professional. However, especially in recent decades, we see the image of the patient reduced to an industrial number, and the health care providers reduced to shift-workers who must meet performance benchmarks, and both patients and the care-givers suffer. Patients feel devalued as persons, and among care providers we see rising rates of “burnout,” depression, cynicism, substance use disorders, early retirements, career changes, and even rising rates of suicide. I have personally witnessed very bright, caring, dedicated, hard working resident physicians who have suffered any one or all of these terribly adverse and painful consequences in their lives. And it should not happen. It does not need to happen.

It seems that for many of these bright, caring people, they have lost all connection to the beauty, the joy, the Good, and the sacred in their vocation. In fact, they lost all sense of vocation entirely. Their work just became day-after-day of trying to meet performance criteria, which by the way, cannot always be done. A few months ago, I was giving a talk in a large auditorium of medical trainees and faculty, on conversations with patients who

are facing a terminal illness, and one of the resident physicians raised his hand and said, “Ok, I understand this is important, but how do I fit this into a 15 minute visit?” to which I answered, “You can’t. If your clinic is like mine, you will usually be running late.” In addition to giving medical trainees permission to defy the yardsticks and run late in their schedule, if that’s what it takes to treat the patient with dignity, they need more encouragement and resources in order to care for themselves spiritually. These are the challenges, and this is where a Franciscan view can be so healing for the healers.

Since my graduation from FST in 2016, I became a professed member of the Secular Franciscan Order, and I continue to teach health care trainees, including nursing students, medical students, resident physicians, and specialized courses for practicing physicians who have encountered troubles in their work. In sometimes subtle ways within the university setting, I share what I’ve learned in my time at the Franciscan School of Theology. It is a joy to share how the Franciscan tradition can provide a wonderful structure, language, and charism that can help one see, and/or rediscover, the beauty, joy, the Goodness, and the sacred in the vocation of the care of the sick.

I am very grateful for the blessing of my time as a student at FST. I pray that God will continue to bless all of our FST students and faculty members as they continue the sacred work of learning and nurturing Franciscan spirituality and tradition in their vocations.

Peace and All Good,

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¹ Daniel P. Sulmasy, O.F.M., M.D., Ph.D., *A Balm for Gilead: Meditations on Spirituality and the Healing Arts* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006), p. 24.