

# REVIEWS

Adv Clin Exp Med 2006, 15, 2, 367–371  
ISSN 1230-025X

TADEUSZ REROŃ

## Doctor – the Servant of Life

### Lekarz – sługa życia

Department of General Moral Theology the Pope's Theological Faculty in Wrocław, Poland

#### Abstract

Protection of human life is essential nowadays when the “culture of death” is attacking the “culture of life” so aggressively. It is impossible without doctor's service of love which expresses itself in various forms of devotion to the patients. That is why doctor's profession is described as a vocation. A doctor, who is greatly responsible for maintaining life, must affirm it and serve it from its very beginning through every stage of life until natural death. Therefore he must not use his knowledge to kill. He has the right to oppose participation in such procedures. In order to realize his ethical command, that the well-being of patients is the most important law, he should keep high moral standards and moral conscience (*Adv Clin Exp Med 2006, 15, 2, 367–371*).

**Key words:** life, affirmation of life, culture of life, medical ethics, doctor's vocation, formation of a doctor.

#### Streszczenie

Obecnie, gdy „kultura śmierci” agresywnie atakuje „kulturę życia”, obrona życia jest ważnym i pilnym zadaniem. Jest to nie do pomyślenia bez posługi miłości lekarza, wyrażającej się w różnych formach całkowitego poświęcenia chorym. W związku z tym pracę lekarza określa się mianem powołania. Lekarz, na którym spoczywa wielka odpowiedzialność za życie, musi afirmować je i służyć w każdym jego stadium – od początku aż do naturalnej śmierci. Jego zadaniem jest także bronić życia. Nie może więc wykorzystywać swej wiedzy do uśmiercania człowieka. Ma też prawo do sprzeciwu wobec udziału w takich działaniach. Lekarz, aby mógł realizować nakaz etyczny, głoszący, że najwyższym prawem jest dobro chorego, powinien mieć właściwie uformowaną postawę moralną i kierować się prawym sumieniem (*Adv Clin Exp Med 2006, 15, 2, 367–371*).

**Słowa kluczowe:** życie, afirmacja życia, kultura życia, etyka lekarska, powołanie lekarza, formacja lekarza.

Owing to its inestimable value health and life protection is a great challenge both for an individual and human society. Illness, which sometimes is experienced very dramatically, is a challenge to do one's best to save patient's self-respect and identity. That is the foundation of medical profession and its ethic imperative, that is to serve human life.

The Church has always honoured doctor's profession. In John Paul II's teaching there appeared issues concerning the doctor's service. Therefore one should ask what the pope said about doctors' duties regarding human health and life protection.

### Doctor's Vocation

It is well-rooted in social awareness that one should feel vocation to work in medical profession. The dignity and high rank of the medical pro-

fession should be guaranteed by high moral standards as well as intellectual and technical skills. Doctors generally enjoy great social respect and high prestige in intelligentsia environment. Therefore John Paul II taught that doctor's work should be regarded as a mission rather than an ordinary job. “To assist, support, comfort and cure human pain is a commitment which, in its nobility, usefulness and ideal is very close to the priest's vocation. Indeed, both offices show direct and evident manifestation of the supreme commandment of one's neighbour love, the love which frequently reaches the point of real heroism. Therefore we should not be surprised by the solemn statement of the Holy Scripture: “revere the physician with the respect he deserves, for the Lord created him. And healing comes from the Lord” (Sir 38:1–2) [1]. According to the pope, “he who respects human

life and generously devotes his own life to serve the life of others, should develop feelings of understanding, empathy and human solidarity. In a word – a feeling of true and sincere love. ‘Those who believe in God can do it more easily as they see a brother in every man they encounter (Mt 23:8). The brother with whom Christ identifies himself to the extent that he considers what has been done to the other as done to himself’ [2]. He who preserves such outlook does not get discouraged when faced with those who are sick, suffering, rejected or at death’s door. He feels challenged to find meaning of his work. In these circumstances is eager to “open” himself and see every human being as an invitation to encounter, dialogue and solidarity. The doctor-patient relationship should be based on dialogue, including listening, respect and attention. It should be a true meeting between two free people, one of whom is armed with trust and the other, shows moral conscience.

John Paul II taught that the physician should distance himself from biologism, that is one-sided view of human being as an integral element of natural environment, subject to the forces of nature. According to the pope it is necessary to make an effort to re-personalize medicine and develop holistic approach to the patient, which would stimulate more human mutual relationship and help to maintain ties between the mental sphere and the suffering body [3]. According to the pope, the physician is not just an ordinary individual, e.g. someone close to the patients on an ontological level, simply a human being. He is seen – and he should think of himself that way – as a human called for to protect life and health. This approach implies specific obligations, the more that if the man he is caring for is seriously threatened by death, illness or disability. Importance, significance of vocation and specificity of the medical profession lies in caring for and saving human life.

Not surprisingly, the pope often showed so much respect to the medical profession. He viewed it as a mission rather than ordinary job. He often encouraged doctors to continue their hard work in a spirit of devotion and brotherhood love. Christ may become an example to follow, a pattern for a moral transformation, powerful inspiration for life. He may become even a source of inner strength helping to perform doctor’s tasks.

## Affirmation of Life

Owing to the high rank of the medical profession John Paul II referred to doctors’ great responsibility for life: “Physicians shoulder a unique responsibility (...). Their profession demands that

they will be guardians and servants of human life” [4]. Nowadays, when the “culture of death” is attacking the “culture of life” so aggressively and often seems to prevail, the protection and promotion of human life is essential. “*Evangelium vitae*” describes new threats to human life: “This situation, with its lights and shadows, should make us all fully aware that we are facing an enormous and dramatic clash between good and evil, death and life, the “culture of death” and the “culture of life”. We find ourselves not only “faced with” but necessarily “in the midst of” this conflict: we are all involved and we all share in it, with the inescapable responsibility of choosing to be unconditionally pro-life” [5].

The pope was aware of the danger that the profession, which since the very beginning has meant service to the suffering human being, may become subject to various ideologies, may deviate from its due way and harm as a consequence. Therefore he taught that: “whenever medical professionals are expected to put an end to a new life, kill a man in agony; use their knowledge to act in opposition to the Creator’s family life purpose or to manipulate and interfere in the natural course of human life or when they forget about priority of their profession, that is the suffering and seriously ill man, then the profession loses its ethos, dignity and moral autonomy” [6].

It is stressed in “*Evangelium vitae*” that: human life is sacred and inviolable at every stage and in every situation; it is an indivisible good [7]. It is so, for it comes from God. Man has been given his life from Him and therefore cannot control it. That is why a man has no right to decide either about his own or his neighbour life. It found its expression in the Old Testament in the commandment “You shall not kill” (Gen 20:13). In the New Testament Christ made this commandment a condition of “coming into life” (Mt 19:18) but – which is understandable – it has been completed by the commandment of love of every human being, which comprises all aspects of ethical norm. Only he who loves is able to comprehend all requirements connected with the respect for human life.

The pope thought that the right to live is the most essential. The right to live, that is the right to be born and live one’s life until natural death: “As long as I am alive I have the right to my existence” [8].

The physician ought to protect a new life effectively, assist it since the beginning and give special support to mothers who are not afraid to give birth and raise their children even without the father’s help. Similarly, they should care for all the needy, suffering and lonely patients, especially in their last days.

The pope was well aware that on the one hand technological progress enables human kind to control his fate, and on the other one, it is a temptation to cross certain limits and take over control over nature. Therefore it poses a threat to human life. It means there are threats related to discoveries in medical science such as artificial fertilization, birth control, hibernation, genetic engineering, psychotropic drugs, organ transplantation etc. Science has its own rights but it should recognize the inviolable limit, that is respect for a person and protection of their right to live from its very beginning.

Promotion of human health and protection of life should always be based on the idea of true Love. Both individuals and organizations dealing with such issues as drug addiction, residential communities for minors or the mentally ill, care and relief centres for AIDS patients, associations for the disabled – all these charitable organizations give proves what can be done in order to revive hope and create suitable life conditions for every human being.

“*Evangelium vitae*” touches the issue of euthanasia and doctor’s responsibility for performing euthanasia act. Euthanasia, in a strict sense, is understood as an act or lack of action, which is intended to cause death in order to put an end to the whole suffering. According to the pope, euthanasia must be called a false mercy, a “perversion” of mercy. True compassion leads to sharing another’s pain; it does not involve killing.

The Church appreciates initiatives that raise social awareness regarding protection of life and health promotion. There is a hope that not all people have given in to the “culture of death”. Numerous initiatives towards the weak and needy members of the society, families willing to receive and care for abandoned children or handicapped people, centres for protection of life – all these initiatives speak for the victory of life. On the wave of discussion on euthanasia and abortion new movements and initiatives are being created to ensure that the law and states institutions in no way violate the right to live, from conception to natural death, but rather protect and promote it. All these initiatives aiming for awakening social conscience resulted in a change of public opinion on such issues as war, death penalty and growing attention paid to ecology [9]. A huge responsibility belongs to mass media which play an important role presenting noble models of life and heroic examples of love for others [10].

Among pro-life activities the pope pointed to medical science that, thanks to the efforts of researchers and practitioners, is making progress in discovering ever more effective remedies.

“*Evangelium vitae*” especially influences attitudes of the physicians who believe in God [11]. Ultimate victory of “culture of life” cannot be achieved without real and full involvement of believers in Christ. They are obliged to serve life as they belong to the Church. And the Church is obliged to serve life as its members form “the people of life” [12].

The culture of life created by celebrating everything that allows us to show its sense and beauty. Celebrating life finds its expression in respect for every human being. Everyone who discovers that life is a gift and is grateful for this, is able to accept the obligation of caring for and protecting life. Celebrating life means honouring God of Life – the God who gives life. The best way to express one’s gratitude to God for the gift of life is love for others showed in everyday and generous self-sacrifice [13].

## Objection Against “Anti-Life Mentality”

The doctors cannot accept abortion or euthanasia. They must oppose any attempt to terminate life. They cannot compromise. John Paul II stated: “Abortion and euthanasia are thus crimes which no human law can claim to legitimize. There is no obligation in conscience to obey such laws; instead there is a grave and clear obligation to oppose them by conscientious objection” [14].

How to practise conscientious objection in everyday life? The doctors should recognize legal system, but must not consider as moral the law that allows to kill innocent life, they cannot accept it as a foundation of their moral life. Especially catholic doctors must not justify any activities against human life pleading such a law. It is necessary to state firmly that law permitting abortion and euthanasia attacks fundamental human right to live. Thus it does not oblige in conscience.

Declaration of procured abortion “*Questio de Abortu*” states that: „It must be clearly understood that whatever may be laid down by civil law in this matter, man can never obey a law which is in itself immoral” [15]. It is unacceptable that doctors would directly be put in the situation that they actively carry out abortion and thus are forced to make a choice between God’s law and their professional position. According to “*Evangelium vitae*”, opposition against such a law means that one can neither comply to the law nor participate in propaganda campaign in favour of such a law or vote for it. It is never licit to support political parties or individual candidates if they promote abortion or euthanasia [16].

The Church's unchangeable teaching was recalled in a doctrinal note concerning attempts to proclaim law which is an attack on the idea of inviolability of human life. All the doctors, and especially Catholics, are obliged to object such activities and to seek the deep sense of life as well as awake responsibility for the legal system [17]. The responsibility lies on the whole society.

In his speeches the pope supported morally righteous doctors and their demand to regard as the most important rule that they should be considered as servants of life and not the servants of death. In "Evangelium vitae" the pope referred to conscientious objection: "The opportunity to refuse to take part in the phases of consultation, preparation and execution of the acts against life should be guaranteed to physicians. He who refers to conscientious objection should be protected against any legal penalties as well as other negative consequences on the legal, disciplinary, financial and professional level" [18]. The conscientious objection is based on the rule that civil law has its binding force – according to God's law – when it serves the common wealth; and this, consequently, is the fact when it serves the well-being of an individual. Therefore, the Christians, bearing in mind the Apostle Peter's words "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29), must demonstrate their objection when faced the law which is obviously contradicting the well-being of an individual and is, in fact, the negation of an individual as it deprives him of the right to live.

The most essential feature of such doctor's outlook is non-participation in termination of patient's life and refusal to perform too risky treatment. As doctor's vocation is protection of health and life he must not use his knowledge and professional skills in activities conflicting with this vocation. In order to realize his ethical command, that the well-being of the patient is the most important rule, he should have proper moral outlook and be directed by righteous conscience.

## The Need for Moral Formation

The conscience plays an important role in ethical standardization of doctor's practice. Medical ethics recognizes it as a binding criterion for subjective value judgement. The doctor should act in accordance with his conscience both in his professional and private life unless he comes to the conclusion that his conscience had been formed wrong [19].

Medical deontology is the best mean of control of conscience. Rules of medical ethics should

serve as a standard in all cases rising doubt. John Paul II wrote in "Veritatis splendor" that conscience should be formed so that it allows to know good and wrong [20]. Through Magisterium the Church helps Christians in this matter. The Church does not violate the freedom of conscience of the believers but wish to serve them in the realization of their vocation.

In medical profession one needs great sensitivity and mobilization of conscience. In "Evangelium vitae" the pope wrote: "What is urgently needed is a general mobilization of consciences and a united ethical effort to activate a great campaign in support of life. Everyone is obliged to create a new culture of life: able to confront problems related to human life, that were unknown in the past and affect human life today" [21]. The first and fundamental step towards this cultural transformation includes shaping physicians' conscience so that they assent the concept of inviolable worth of every human being.

In their medical practice the doctors often have to face various moral dilemma. Therefore they need advice concerning ethical issues to their profession. Since there is a great variety of the ideas and attitudes related to protection and promotion of human life, the necessity of medical ethics is undeniable [22].

In order to justify physician's duty to serve human life John Paul II often referred to the Hippocratic Oath. In his opinion, this ancient oath is still relevant and requires that all physicians in the position of a companion in distress and a defender of human dignity and human rights, particularly when life and health are threatened [23].

In order to solve moral problems the doctors, as the other believers, may appeal to God. Their prayer is a source of spiritual light, thoughts, emotions and intentions, the driving force of all their actions and source of strength in performing their hard and responsible duties. Speaking about the influence of the religion on doctor's behaviour the pope referred to the example of Hebrew "midwives who feared God" (Ex 1:17). It is precisely obedience to Almighty God – that gives strength and courage to oppose unjust human laws [24].

Influence of religious outlook on doctor's involvement in affirmation of life finds its expression in the fact that we find physicians in the roll of the morally heroic saints. The list of the saints has not been closed yet, on the contrary, it is still growing. The life and deeds of canonized people should be an example to follow for everyone, especially to health-care personnel. However the most important example, source for moral transformation, and inspiration for one's lifetime is Christ. He is to be the source of spiritual strength

to perform duties and bear responsibility related to medical profession.

Addressing ill, visiting hospitals John Paul II never forgot those who defend human life – doctors and health-care personnel. He often met doctors on various scientific meetings or workshops and expressed a real concern for human in his speeches.

The pope saw doctor's service mainly as service for alive human being. In the context of the abovementioned statements the pope quoted well

know saying of Saint Irenaeus's of Lyons: "Living man is the glory of God". This is the source of significance of medicine which is both art and science. If life is God's gift then it should be ultimate and unchangeable standard for medical practitioners in all stages and activities of this art. This makes the service sacred.

John Paul II valued medical profession, profession that could be described as an ardent and definite approval of life.

## References

- [1] **Jan Paweł II:** Przemówienie do włoskich lekarzy katolickich (28 XII 1978). W: Jan Paweł II, O cierpieniu. Wypowiedzi Ojca Świętego do chorych i pracowników Służby Zdrowia (1978–1982), Warszawa 1985, p. 16.
- [2] **Jan Paweł II:** Przemówienie do uczestniczek Kongresu Położnych (26 I 1980), *ibidem*, p. 71.
- [3] **Jan Paweł II:** Przemówienie do uczestników Włoskiego Stowarzyszenia Medycyny Wewnętrznej (27 X 1980, *ibidem*, p. 114.
- [4] **Jan Paweł II:** Encyklika o wartości i nienaruszalności życia ludzkiego *Evangelium vitae*. Watykan 1995, no. 89.
- [5] *Evangelium vitae*, no. 28.
- [6] **Jan Paweł II:** By chronić etos zawodu lekarskiego. Przemówienie do profesorów i studentów Wydziału Medycznego Polikliniki Gemelli (28 VI 1984), L'Osservatore Romano (pol) 5 (1984) no. 7, p. 13.
- [7] *Evangelium vitae*, no. 87.
- [8] **Kawecki W:** Dlaczego Kościół broni życia? Kraków 1996, p. 79.
- [9] *Evangelium vitae*, no. 27.
- [10] *Evangelium vitae*, no. 98.
- [11] *Evangelium vitae*, no. 2.
- [12] *Evangelium vitae*, no. 6–7.
- [13] **Nagórny J:** Między "kulturą śmierci" a "kulturą życia" – wyzwania współczesności. W: Jan Paweł II, *Evangelium vitae*. Tekst i komentarze. Lublin 1997, p. 228.
- [14] *Evangelium vitae*, no. 73.
- [15] **Kongregacja Nauki Wiary:** Deklaracja o przerywaniu ciąży *Questio de abortu*. W: W trosce o życie. Wybrane dokumenty Stolicy Apostolskiej. Tarnów 1998, p. 312.
- [16] *Evangelium vitae*, no. 73.
- [17] **Kongregacja Nauki Wiary:** Nota doktrynalna o niektórych aspektach działalności i postępowania katolików w życiu politycznym. Watykan 2002, no. 4.
- [18] *Evangelium vitae*, no. 74.
- [19] **Olejnik S:** Etyka lekarska. Katowice 1995, p. 39.
- [20] **Jan Paweł II:** Encyklika o niektórych problemach nauczania moralnego Kościoła *Veritatis splendor*. Watykan 1993, no. 64.
- [21] *Evangelium vitae*, no. 95.
- [22] **Wróbel J:** Człowiek i medycyna. Teologiczno-moralne podstawy ingerencji medycznych. Kraków 1999, p. 227.
- [23] **Olejnik S:** *op. cit.*, p. 42.
- [24] *Evangelium vitae*, no. 73.

## Address for correspondence:

Tadeusz Reroń  
Katedra Teologii Moralnej Ogólnej PWT  
ul. Katedralna 4  
50-328 Wrocław

Conflict of interest: None declared

Received: 9.06.2005  
Revised: 6.07.2005  
Accepted: 2.12.2005

Praca wpłynęła do Redakcji: 9.06.2005 r.  
Po recenzji: 6.07.2005 r.  
Zaakceptowano do druku: 2.12.2005 r.