

The Catechism on Health Care

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What does the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teach about health care and the practice of medicine? While it does not explain how to treat diabetes, perform surgery, insert an intravenous line or code for an office visit, it does provide the moral framework within which medical professionals must act toward their fellow human beings in the course of their professions. Since many secular professional organizations today claim a moral authority over health care professionals when they issue practice guidelines¹, it is important for Catholic health care professionals to know what the moral authority of the Catholic Church teaches. The Catholic Church is the only entity which possesses a teaching authority granted to it directly by Christ.²

The *Catechism* is organized into four broad parts, or “pillars”. Part I is called the “Profession of Faith”, or what Catholics believe, as it is described by the Apostles’ Creed. Part II covers “The Celebration of the Christian Mystery”, in essence the sacraments. Part III teaches “The Moral Life in Christ”, or how to apply faith in everyday life. Finally, Part IV discusses “Christian Prayer”, with a particular focus on the Lord’s Prayer, or the Our Father. Together, these four pillars support Catholics in believing, celebrating, living and praying the faith.

Each paragraph in the *Catechism* is numbered. A simple review of the index of the Catechism indicates that there are a multiple paragraphs which address the topics of “health”, “medical treatment”, “medicine” and “science.” These sections can be accessed through the links below. Within each paragraph, references to related materials are in parentheses (or in the margins, in the print version of the *Catechism*.) Exploring these related paragraphs can lead to a fuller understanding of the topic. The *Catechism* is also well-referenced with copious footnotes. Many of these Church documents are available on-line, in English translations. Consulting these original documents can help explain even further why the Church teaches what it does.

The Ten Commandments form the basis for the discussion of Part III, “The Moral Life in Christ.” Most of the bioethical questions which health care professionals face are covered under the Fifth Commandment, “Thou shalt not kill.” This Commandment protects both human life and human dignity and promotes peace. The issue of family planning, both in spacing births and in treating infertility, is covered under the Sixth Commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” because this Commandment protects the dignity of marriage.³ Part III of the *Catechism* also discusses the foundations of the dignity of the human person. Since the term “dignity” is sometimes used to promote immoral acts, such as euthanasia, it is important to have an authentic understanding of the origin, attributes and application of the dignity of the human person. The link to this section is included below.

Lastly, the Catholic faith has a powerful sacramental response to suffering and death, the sacrament of the anointing of the sick. Through this sacrament, the sick receive the grace they need to endure their illness in peace, and the dying are prepared for the passage to eternal life. The explanation of this sacrament is found in Part II, “The Celebration of the Christian Mystery.”

In summary, the *Catechism* is an important reference for every health care professional. The healing professions are faced with many challenges and assaults which seek to undermine their essential work of upholding the dignity of the human person. Catholic health care professionals should become familiar with the assistance the Catholic Church provides them in applying their faith life to their professional life. The *Catechism* speaks for itself, so follow these links to begin exploring it today.

Topics of Interest

Anointing of the Sick [1499-1525](#)

Dignity of the Human Person [1700-1876](#) , [2284-2301](#)

Fifth Commandment

and abortion [2270-2275](#)

and euthanasia [2276-2279](#)

and suicide [2280-2283](#)

Health

and the virtue of temperance [2290](#)

and use of drugs [2291](#)

and worship of the body [2289](#)

duty of concern for health [2288](#)

Medical Treatment [2278-2279](#), [2292](#), [2295-2297](#)

Medicine [2290](#)

Science

and faith [159](#)

in the service of man [2293-2294](#)

Sixth Commandment

and birth control [2366-2372](#)

and infertility [2373-2379](#)

FOOTNOTES

1. As an example, see the recent Policy Statement on Emergency Contraception issued by the American Academy of Pediatrics. In directing pediatricians to prescribe emergency contraception to all of their teenage patients, it states, "According to the policy, pediatricians have a duty to inform their patients about relevant, legally available treatment options to which they object and have a moral obligation to refer patients to other physicians who will provide and educate about those services." Pediatrics 2012; 130:1174–1182.
2. The teaching authority of the Church is based in Scripture. Jesus gave authority to His Apostles to continue His work on earth. They in turn passed this authority to their successors, the bishops, through the process of apostolic succession. Consider these references.
 - a. [Matthew 16: 17-19](#): Jesus said to him in reply, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."
 - b. [Luke 10:16](#): [Jesus sent his disciples on mission with these words,] "Whoever listens to you listens to me. Whoever rejects you rejects me. And whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me."
 - c. [John 20:21-23](#): [Jesus said to his disciples], "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."
 - d. Paul's instructions to Timothy, one of the first Bishops:
 - [2 Timothy 1:6-7](#): For this reason, I remind you to stir into flame the gift of God that you have through the imposition of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control.
 - [2 Timothy 4:1-5](#): I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingly power: proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching. For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine but, following their own desires and insatiable curiosity, will accumulate teachers and will stop listening to the truth and will be diverted to myths. But you, be self-

possessed in all circumstances; put up with hardship; perform the work of an evangelist; fulfill your ministry.

3. A more detailed explanation of the Catechism's teaching on family planning is found in the February on-line ["Catechism 101: A Counter-cultural Look at Birth Control."](#)