

## Honesty

*. . . is such a lonely word  
Everyone is so untrue  
Honesty is hardly ever heard  
And mostly what I need from you  
Billy Joel*

Recently, some have heard me grumble about a trip to the hospital emergency room with my mother. She was in severe pain in virtue of a fall on Christmas morning: A vertebra was fractured and compressing a nerve, causing her great anguish. Family members suggested a trip to the ER as a way to get through all of the tentative medical steps dictated by the restrictions of insurance. This turned out to be very bad advice and an eye opening experience about the current state of health care in this country, (but that's another story).

The really disturbing subtext to the whole endeavor seemed to be the requirement to lie. We were upfront and honest about things: The primary care physician was already on the case and there was a pending appointment for an intervention. It was clear to me that, upon learning these details, the ER doctor mentally bumped my mother down to the bottom of the list generated by her triage evaluation. One wonders how that night would have gone if we had simply reported that she had fallen down and was in excruciating pain. The experience left me feeling that what they really wanted from us was a lie or a half-truth to proceed. As it was, we were held prisoner for 7 hours and sent home with more pills.

My read of that situation may be all wrong but, if not, then dishonesty is being incorporated into the very structure of Emergency Medicine. I deliberately use that word "structure" to echo sentiments of Pope John Paul II who often spoke about "structures of sin." In the 1987 Encyclical "*Solicitudo Rei Socialis* (36)" the Pope wrote the following:

*If the present situation can be attributed to difficulties of various kinds, it is not out of place to speak of "structures of sin," which. . . are rooted in personal sin, and thus always linked to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures,*

*consolidate them and make them difficult to remove. And thus they grow stronger, spread, and become the source of other sins, and so influence people's behavior."*

Had we called an ambulance and had mom rushed directly into the ER, bypassing the waiting room full of people suffering from the flu, perhaps we would have gotten a better outcome for her painful situation. But, as it was, that would have been a lie. There was, in truth, no need to call an ambulance. Moreover, the truth was that mom had already seen a doctor. The problem is that the strictures of the insurance company were binding the hands of the doctor to attempt the least expensive measures before doing something really effective. Are we fools for having stuck with the truth?



### **(Diogenes searching for an honest man.)**

I appeal to this personal experience as a means to examine this idea of "structural sin." The gross understaffing at the hospital combined with the strictures imposed by the insurance company introduce the temptation to lie in order to get to the front of the line. Further back in the chain of responsibility, we have the politicians who refuse to come up with any meaningful solutions to the healthcare problems in favor of their ideologies and the influence of lobbyists.

The only way to counter the structuralizing of dishonesty is for us, as individuals, to be rigorously dedicated to honesty. As one writer put it . . .

*However, honesty is not mere optimism. The honest person is not one who tells the truth at all moments because they are too stupid or think that truth will magically make everything easy. Nor is it mere legalism or fear of punishment that makes someone truly honest. Rather, the honest person is in love with the truth.*