

Annual Pastoral Visit for Building Catholic Identity

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The two Catholic hospitals in Kansas City, Missouri, operate under a unique relationship with the Diocese of Kansas City – St. Joseph. As discussed in a previous HCEUSA article, St. Joseph Medical Center and St. Mary’s Medical Center were bought by Prime Healthcare, Inc., a for-profit company based in California.¹ Recognizing the importance of the legacy of the hospital’s founding Sisters, Prime entered into a formal covenant agreement with the diocese referred to as the Catholic Traditions Agreement to maintain the historic mission and Catholic identity of the facilities. However, with all of the changes involved in the sale of the hospitals, as well as the transition from “not-for-profit” to “for-profit” status, making it clear within the community that the hospitals are still Catholic has been a challenge — even staff have been confused about the situation at times. And so, the Office of Catholic Health Care (of which I am the current Director) was mutually established to serve as a direct liaison between the diocese and the hospitals. My office has then collaborated on a number of different educational offerings and events aimed at supporting and promoting the ongoing mission of the hospitals as Catholic health care ministries. One of the most important of these events is the Annual Pastoral Visit by Bishop Johnston to each of the hospitals.

THE FIRST “PASTORAL VISIT”

The first Pastoral Visit emerged, quite simply, out of a desire to show that the facilities were indeed still Catholic by having the bishop visit them in person. This was also in keeping with his pastoral responsibility for all Catholic health care ministries within his diocese.² As the USCCB has noted “The bishop has the responsibility and right to exercise his authority over all apostolates in his diocese, including that of health care, in accordance with the Code of Canon Law, c. 678, and any other universal or particular law that may be enacted.”³ From the beginning of the relationship between the facilities and the diocese, there was a strong desire to maintain close relationships between hospital leadership and the bishop in order to respect his role and authority over these important Catholic entities in our area. One important way a bishop carries out this pastoral responsibility in his diocese is through the Pastoral Visit. As explained in Canon 396.1: “A bishop is obliged to visit the diocese annually either in whole or in part, so that he visits the entire diocese at least every five years either personally or, if he has been legitimately impeded, through the coadjutor bishop, an auxiliary, vicar general, episcopal vicar, or another presbyter.”⁴ And so, while our Catholic Traditions Agreement spells out several ways the relationship between the diocese and the hospitals is to be carried out

and supported, it was recognized that having the bishop make a Pastoral Visit to bless the facilities and engage with the staff would be a concrete way to manifest the continued Catholic identity of the hospitals.

It took some time for all of this to be arranged, but two years after the sale to Prime was officially completed Bishop Johnston made his first Pastoral Visit. He spent the morning at one facility, touring a unit, visiting with both patients and practitioners there, before holding a prayer service followed by an open forum for other staff. He then spent the afternoon at the other facility doing the same. The visit was very successful and was deeply appreciated by both Catholic and non-Catholic staff. The event was also reported in the diocesan paper and through our social media pages. The overwhelming feedback from those who were able to attend was basically, “When can the bishop come visit again?”

ESTABLISHING THE PASTORAL VISIT AS AN ANNUAL EVENT

In addition to respecting and promoting the bishop’s pastoral responsibility over the hospitals, there had been a desire to establish a long-term, consistent event to celebrate, if you will, the Catholic identity of our hospitals and their relationship with the diocese. And while the Office of Catholic Health Care is in regular contact with the hospitals as directed by our covenant agreement, much of that work is behind the scenes with hospital leadership. Plus, the bishop is the focal point for Catholic identity in the diocese. So, even though Bishop Johnston’s initial visit was viewed as a single

event, we quickly saw the value of establishing it as an Annual Pastoral Visit. We have now made it a priority to schedule the Annual Visit early each year to get it on the bishop’s schedule. The event is also well-publicized early in the Fall so that staff can arrange to join us, and recorded for those who are not able to join in person. Our local Catholic media also covers the story to continue to let members of our parishes know that the hospitals are carrying on the historic missions of their founding Sisters.

The importance of this Annual Pastoral Visit was manifested rather strongly last Fall during the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic because the visit had to be canceled due to the restrictions put in place across the country for hospital visitations. And while the staff completely understood the need for this, many expressed their disappointment to the two CEOs that the bishop would not be visiting. As a result, the CEOs asked if Bishop Johnston would make a video for staff that could be posted internally, as a small way to make up for the lack of a personal visit. Bishop Johnston was able to compose a beautiful message of gratitude and blessing for our hospital workers. This video was also very well received, with both CEOs getting appreciative feedback from the staff — once again, both Catholic and non-Catholic employees expressed how much they appreciated that the bishop took the time to let them know he and the people of the diocese were praying for all of our local, front-line health care workers. In our annual meeting between the bishop and the hospital leadership they made a point of sharing this feedback with him, and how much his direct, personal interaction with the hospitals has meant.

THE ONGOING VALUE OF THE ANNUAL PASTORAL VISIT

Needless to say, the Annual Pastoral Visit has become an important and visible sign of the Catholic identity of St. Joseph Medical Center and St. Mary's Medical Center for our staff and patients. And since the event is publicized, the bishop's visit also promotes our identity within the metropolitan area served by our hospitals. But more importantly, this Annual Pastoral Visit has fostered a much deeper relationship between the hospitals, their staff, and the diocese through the personal touch of Bishop Johnston. He has embraced these visits, and his messages are truly pastoral — speaking to the hearts and souls of our health care workers.

As everyone involved with health care knows, this Summer was especially challenging with the rise of the Delta variant. Just when most of the country had been able to get their COVID-19 vaccines, and we were all starting to breathe a sigh of relief that the pandemic was coming to an end, Delta swept across the country leading once more to full ERs, high numbers of COVID positive cases, and sadly, more deaths. In August, our CEOs contacted my Office of Catholic Health Care to ask if the bishop would make another video for staff. Once again, Bishop Johnston was able to compose a new message of encouragement, hope, and gratitude. The video was especially meaningful given that we are in one of the areas where the Delta variant was particularly prominent. Fortunately, the Delta variant did subside in our area by early Fall, and Bishop Johnston was able to return in person for the Annual Pastoral Visit at the end of October. The turnout this year was once again very

strong and both hospitals, and it was clear that the bishop's presence was a blessing for all those who attended.

It is also important to recognize that hosting an annual event like this takes time, planning, and money and that working with staff to arrange schedules so as many who desire to attend are able is a challenge, which shows their commitment of hospital leadership in supporting the Annual Pastoral Visit. Yet, I am not sure that myself or the bishop would have thought when we were arranging the first visit, or even when we decided to establish this as an annual event, that the hospital staff would have been so disappointed at his absence last year, or that the CEOs would have ever considered asking him to make a video encouraging their employees this Summer during the height of the Delta variant rise. For me, these are all clear signs that here in Kansas City our two Catholic hospitals and the diocese are embracing the "covenant" aspect of our Catholic Traditions Agreement.

CONCLUSION

In close, I offer for your consideration the idea of hosting an Annual Pastoral Visit with your local bishop. I know it is not uncommon for Catholic hospitals to have the bishop come to the facility for a special event — the dedication of a new prayer space, the blessing of a new unit, or perhaps on special occasions and anniversaries. However, a Pastoral Visit is different. An invitation to the bishop acknowledges his pastoral responsibility for the hospital and helps foster a better relationship between the hospital and the diocese. Further, as we have learned from our experience here

in Kansas City, a public visit like this can be a powerful sign for employees and the local community of the Catholic identity of the hospital — especially if this can be established as a regular event. But most of all, an Annual Pastoral Visit provides an opportunity for a more personal relationship with your bishop. All of these aspects will enrich the ministry of Catholic health care. ✚

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ENDNOTES

1. See, "A Three-Pronged Approach to Ecclesial Relations for Catholic Health Care Facilities," *Health Care Ethics USA*, Winter-Spring 2020, Vol. 28. No. 1, pp.39 – 42.
2. For a summary of the relevant Codes, teachings of Vatican II, and the ERDs, see John J. Coughlin, "Catholic Health Care and the Diocesan Bishop," 40 *Cath. Law.* 85 (2000-2001). Available at: https://scholarship.law.nd.edu/law_faculty_scholarship/69, and Barbara Anne Cusack, JCD, "The Role of the Diocesan Bishop in Relation to Catholic Health Care," *Health Progress*, July-August 2006, pp.64-65.
3. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "The Pastoral Role of the Diocesan Bishop in Catholic Health Care Ministry," Second Edition (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 2020), #8, p.2).
4. *Code of Canon Law*, Latin/English Edition (Washington, D.C.: Canon Law Society of America, 1983), 396.1.