

## Ethics Matters

### *Evangelii Gaudium*

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Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, is a clarion call to the people of God and to the leadership of the Catholic health care ministry. In this document, the Pope calls the Church to a recommitment to the task of evangelization, by which he means the cultivation within the Church and within society and culture of the significance and meaning of brotherly love. The Pope "dreams of a missionary 'option', that is a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than her self-preservation." (27) For Pope Francis the unity of the love of God and neighbor, brotherly love are the centerpiece of the the kerymga, the message of the Gospel.

This call to evangelization should not be confused with proselytization, nor should it be confused with the task of childhood learning of catechism. Evangelization, as Pope Francis envisions it, is the task of discerning the meaning of brotherly love so that it has significance for women and men engaged in the tasks of supporting a family, contributing to a domestic

economy and shaping a world which is reflective of a socially and culturally appropriate enactment of the common good. Evangelization is not about theories. Evangelization is about the manner in which the Gospels, particularly love of neighbor, can be relevant in the day-to-day lives of persons within and outside of the Church. Evangelization is about how Christians live and the witness that their lives can be to the many others with whom they are joined by bonds of culture and social structures.

And what is the role of the Catholic health care ministry in the task of evangelization? No section of *Evangelii Gaudium* is directed explicitly to the Church's health care ministry, nor to any other specialized ministry such as education or social work. However, Pope Francis does speak about other Church institutions "as a source of enrichment for the Church, raised by the Spirit for evangelizing different areas and sectors." (29) The area or population served by the American Catholic health care ministry can, perhaps, best be defined as the vulnerable. Persons present themselves to the ministry because they are vulnerable, they are sick, they are dying, they are victims of trauma. Persons come to the ministry because to some

extent and in some manner they are losing control of a dimension of their being. They are frightened and afraid. In an era in which the model of care is focused on wellness and the prevention of mortality and morbidity, the ministry should not lose sight of the fact that the focus on wellness is defined over and against mortality and morbidity. The best preventive care imaginable must ultimately yield to the inevitability of mortality.

The task of evangelization associated with the Church's health care ministry is to engage the vulnerability, the morbidity and mortality associated with life. In some ways this is not a new task. Compassion, respect for human dignity and the sanctity of human life are each traditional efforts to engage the vulnerability of patients. But I think Pope Francis is calling the ministry to something new and something more challenging. The call is first to articulate what the meaning of brotherly love entails, what the unity of love of God and love of neighbor means in the context of this ministry. This is a daunting task for leaders of the ministry. The task is daunting because it is not about talking about love of God and love of neighbor, but rather it is about shaping the engagements of patients with caregivers so that love is mediated in these engagements. Evangelization is about meaning. Thus the litmus test of the success of evangelization in the health care ministry rests with the experience of patients and families. Evangelization is not about theory, but about creating meaning

that can sustain the faith and well-being of the vulnerable.

Evangelization may appear to be a very explicitly Christian, even Catholic concern. However, brotherly love and the unity of love of God and neighbor are not uniquely Christian or Catholic tenets of faith. The good deeds of our Jewish colleagues and the role of the fifth pillar of Islam for our Muslim colleagues all converge in a common element shared by these three faith traditions. The ministry brings together an array of women and men of a variety of religious faiths. The bond that holds all of us together in a common ministry is not simply the clinical and professional skills that we bring to the ministry, as important as these skills are, but rather our shared commitment to provide meaning to the vulnerable who come to us for care.