

IN UNCERTAIN DAYS, A NEW SAINT POINTS A WAY

We took an optimistic step in putting together this issue of *Health Progress*. It presumes that U.S. health reform — “Obamacare” — will prevail though the November elections and that the Medicaid expansion will go forward, though perhaps at a slower pace, despite the Supreme Court’s ruling that state participation may not be required. To Catholic health care providers, the ruling means that, in addition to gearing up to meet the demands of millions of newly insured, advocacy will be needed to influence resistant states. Both the health of low-income Americans and the financial viability of Catholic health care providers are at risk.



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Coincidentally, as I write this column, pilgrims are making their way to Rome for the Oct. 21 ceremony to mark the canonization of Blessed Marianne Cope. This newest of the American saints — an honor she shares with Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, who will be canonized on the same day — is noted for her 35 years of courageous work in Hawaii with women and children suffering from leprosy. She is also well known to many in Catholic health care for her role in establishing two Catholic hospitals in New York: St. Joseph’s in Syracuse and St. Elizabeth Medical Center in Utica. St. Elizabeth is sponsored by the Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities, her religious order.

If readers will indulge me in a bit of whimsy, these two events — the difficult work of both preparing and advocating for the expansion of Medicaid and the canonization of Blessed Marianne Cope — are tied together in my mind by a couple of common threads. The first of these is the popular title by which this new American saint is known: the “beloved mother of outcasts.” She earned that description by her compassionate care in Hawaii for people who, at the time, were shunned, forced to live in exile.

The second thread is that, in the Catholic Church’s formal process of canonization, saints are associated with miracles. To be declared a saint, a person must first have lived a remarkable life, one regarded as holy by people who knew her. Second, two miracles — usually healings that defy medical explanation — must be attributed to her intercession after her death.

Anyone familiar with the long road to health reform will understand the first thread: millions of people in the U.S. are social outcasts when it comes

to health care. Keeping the cause of the poor and vulnerable, the uninsured, in front of those governors and legislators inclined to resist the expansion of Medicaid, while marshaling resources to meet the pent-up needs of the newly insured in participating states, will depend on our walking in the shoes of American health care’s newest saint, carrying on her work of service to outcasts.

The second thread will be more difficult for some to follow, given that not everyone is inclined to belief in miracles. When it comes to the prospect of divine intervention, people generally fall along a spectrum bounded on one end by the excessively gullible who see “signs” everywhere, and on the other by hardcore skeptics who give no quarter whatsoever to the supernatural.

So in the spirit of compromise that we desperately hope will characterize our nation’s leaders post-election, let me suggest a middle ground. It is based on an exchange I recall, possibly imperfectly, from a delightful Canadian film *Lies My Father Told Me*.

This 1975 film is set in an Orthodox Jewish community, where David, a young boy struggling to grow up, idolizes his grandfather, his Zaida, a rag-picker. The two are riding together in Zaida’s horse-drawn wagon one afternoon, through the back streets of Montreal, when David turns to his mentor and asks, “Grandfather, do you believe in miracles?” The grandfather thinks for a long minute, then replies honestly, “No, son. But I *rely* on them.”

Given the current contentious political climate in our country, and an imminent election whose outcome could threaten not only the future of Medicaid expansion, but of health reform in general, whether we believe in miracles or not, we too might do well to rely on them. Believers might even invite the intercession of Saint Marianne Cope.

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