

Our Greatest Treasures



By Sr. CAROL KEEHAN, DC

One of the great treasures of our church is its social teaching. As Catholics, we are truly proud of the way our church throughout the centuries has taken the Gospel of Jesus Christ and made it concrete in the world. Many non-Catholics who join us in our ministry tell us they do so largely because they are so attracted to this teaching and its lived reality in our ministries.

Keeping that social teaching vibrant in our ministries despite uncertainty, and protecting and preserving our commitment to it in the face of the harsh economic and social demands today, is no small challenge. This special issue of *Health Progress* helps us to reflect on that primary commitment which has guided Catholic health care since its inception in this country.

Recently, in October 2011, Cardinal Peter Turkson, who heads the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, issued an important letter to the world. In it, he reminded us of Pope Benedict XVI's admonition in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* that to function correctly, the economy needs ethics; "and not just of any kind, but one that is people-centered." At the end of the letter, Cardinal Turkson notes that "for every Christian, there is a special call of the Spirit to become committed decisively and generously so that the many dynamics underway will be channeled towards prospects of fraternity and the common good."

Sadly, today in many forums, the concept of the common good is ridiculed or, at best, seen as an option. For us, in an essential Catholic ministry, the concept of the common good

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CARDINAL PETER TURKSON



is fundamental to our existence, and it operates on many fronts. Articles in this issue of *Health Progress* highlight reflections on four key areas of social teaching: workplace justice, Catholic identity, care of the poor and vulnerable and community needs assessment.

Workplace justice is not only a responsibility; it should also be something we do with a special joy. In health care, our staff is the heart of our mission and a constant inspiration. As I said when I was installed as CHA's board chair in June 2004, it is overwhelming to think of what goes on in each of our facilities each day. How many frail elderly are gently welcomed into our emergency departments and, in the midst of that hectic scene, are carefully

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and slowly questioned, undressed for an exam and assured that we will be there for them?

I asked the audience to think about the fact that in the midst of a thunderstorm, when the lights blink, how fortunate are our patients on ventilators, our patients in the midst of operative procedures — how fortunate they are that people in our power plants monitor and test our emergency generators around the clock so that a power interruption from any source never threatens our patients' safety.

Patients and their families throughout our organizations are blessed by the caring support of our staff. Whether in the operating room's waiting area, at the bedside of an ICU patient, in the outpatient radiation and chemotherapy units, in the neonatal intensive care units — in these and all the other places they meet, patients and their families

encounter the compassion and care of Christ through his people because of the devotion of our staff.

Our staff often humbles us by their sense of mission and responsibility. For so many of our staff, it is the heart that supervises them and their commitment to our mission. Therefore, we owe them not only justice, but love.

Leaders in Catholic health care therefore must be committed to fostering the components that make for a just workplace. These include not only just wages and benefits, but an atmosphere on the job that supports discussion of working conditions and challenges.

In these pages, a new CHA white paper, prepared by the Just Workplace Task Force, helps us look with fresh eyes at our own individual workplaces.

Here too, Kami Timm, mission director at St. Joseph Health, considers how we as a ministry manifest our Catholic identity. As she points out, CHA's shared statement of identity says, "We work to bring alive the Gospel vision of justice and peace." In that shared statement, we commit to:

- Promote and defend human dignity
- Attend to the whole person
- Care for poor and vulnerable persons
- Promote the common good
- Act on behalf of justice
- Steward resources
- Act in communion with the church

Living the shared statement of Catholic identity requires much of us. Her article invites us to pause, to look at our practices to see if they are compatible with our words.

Sr. Judith Ann Karam, CSA, helps us reflect on the poor and vulnerable who count on us. This is a critical time for

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them as we implement health reform and the promise it holds for the poor. Making health care affordable and accessible is our duty, Sr. Judith Ann states. Hers is a critical insight at a time when our advocacy offers the best hope for the poor to get health insurance.

Finally, Julie Trocchio, who has championed CHA's efforts in community benefit for years, helps us understand the new federal community assessment requirements for tax-exempt hospitals. Julie often tells members we have been doing these things already, not because it was a requirement, but because we came to our communities to meet their health needs. And therefore, we have always tried to understand our communities so we could serve them better. Her reflections on how the community assessment requirements speak to our Catholic identity remind us that, as the *Ethical and Religious Directives* state, Catholic health care is called to "provide service to and advocacy for those people whose social condition puts them at the margins of society and makes them particularly vulnerable to discrimination."

I hope you will enjoy this issue of *Health Progress* and share it. I hope it makes you proud to be in a ministry that tries daily in so many ways to bring alive the beautiful social teachings of our church.

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