

FOLLOWING THE SPIRIT IN CHANGING TIMES

The illustration on our cover, viewed in the context of uncertain times for Catholic health care, reminded me of two well-known quotes attributed to St. Madeleine Sophie Barat. “Times change and we must change with them,” admonished this forward-looking founder of the Religious of the Sacred Heart, whose spirituality developed amid the social turmoil unleashed by the French Revolution. Within just her lifetime, she watched her “little society” grow from a small community in Paris to an international religious order of educators with 3,500 members in 17 countries.



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Despite that success, later, looking back, she said if she had her life to live over again, she would seek only to follow the guidance of the Spirit.

This issue of *Health Progress* is intended to hold those two ideas in tension: following the Spirit in changing times. These difficult days for Catholic health care, when it feels to many of us as if the ground were shifting under our feet, require leaders to prepare for change while holding fast to values. They are times that call for ongoing discernment in the spiritual sense of the word — striving to make choices within our economic and social context that will help us to move courageously forward while remaining rooted in our faith.

This isn't easy. Ignatius of Loyola may, in the 17th century, have developed a system for Christian discernment that is often found useful still today. But even with his *Spiritual Exercises*, and other tools based upon it, hearing God's voice amid the clamor of contemporary events, the demands of our daily lives and the responsibilities of our workdays, can be difficult, exasperatingly so.

Those familiar with the story of Elijah will remember that God's voice came to him neither in the mighty wind nor the earthquake nor the raging fire, but as a gentle whisper (1 Kings 19:11-13). It can be easy to overlook such whispers; to tune them out. For one thing, the messages they bring may be inconvenient to our plans. Even when we think we know where God is leading, we might doubt the wisdom or be afraid to follow. As we know from many stories in the Bible — Jonah, Job, Jeremiah, for instance — God's vision, which is, of course, far bigger than our own, may not make sense to us. It isn't always practical, at least not on our limited terms.

I recently came across an excerpt from a book

by David Lonsdale, postgraduate dean at Heythrop College, University of London. In his *Listening to the Music of the Spirit: The Art of Discernment* (Ave Maria Press), Lonsdale wrote, “Christian discernment ... is not a separate compartment of daily life, but on the contrary, the ground on which everything stands; the fundamental relationship which roots and feeds us and gives shape to life as a whole and all it contains.” He notes that discernment requires “prayerful reflection” on such questions as “Where is God meeting me and drawing me, in the events of my life and in the world around me?”

As we know, such questions don't get answered on the fly. They require ongoing examination of conscience, as serious Catholics are wont to describe the reflections that help them determine where, in their efforts to follow the Spirit, they have hit or missed the mark.

This January-February issue comes to you, the leaders of Catholic health care, at the approach of a new year and spans two liturgical seasons that call us to reflect. Advent, a season of hope, will be nearing its end when the journal shows up in your mail, and Lent, a season for repentance, will be just beginning at about the time we send out the next issue.

We have limited the “back-to-basics” articles in our main section to four, each by an expert in Catholic health care, each focusing on a particular expression of our values. Sr. Carol Keehan, DC, provides specific context to each of the topics with her introduction to our theme on page 4.

We hope these articles — each, in a sense, an opportunity for examining our consciences — will lure you away from work, or entertainment, or the cacophonous political chatter. We hope they provide opportunities to reflect again on new and deeper ways that, in each of your organizations, Catholic health care's fundamental principles might be expressed.

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