

A Franciscan Model For Conducting Ministry

A Sponsor Reveals How Her Institute Brings the Healing Mission of Jesus to People in Need



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The Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration (FSPA) have maintained its ministry in health care since 1883. As a religious institute, we act in the name of the Catholic Church, seeking a solitary goal — to carry forward the work of Christ within the embrace of the befriending spirit. Christ entered this world to give witness to the truth, to rescue and not sit in judgment, to serve and not be served.¹

Our particular perspective is grounded in a triple way — within the spiritual tradition of the founder of the order, within the intentions of the founders of the congregation, and within the reality of the contemporary world in which the congregation expresses its mission.

THE SPIRITUAL TRADITION

“It seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord led me among them and I showed a heart of mercy to them.”
— Francis of Assisi, *The Testament*, n. 1-2

We carry forward the healing mission of Jesus by following the example of St. Francis. Franciscans understand their distinctive way to do health care ministry is found primarily in the story of St. Francis’ encounter with the leper. Francis found it “bitter” to be “among” the lepers, but when he finally had the courage to embrace a leper, giving him a coin and kissing him, Francis found his spiritual life at a turning point. The story embodies the pivotal meaning of conversion in the life of the Christian. It challenges us to have:

- our feet on the ground (in reality).
- our eyes turned toward the world (at reality).
- our hands ready to compassionately embrace human needs.

- a style of presence that is characterized by principles of “attentive compassion.”

When the eyes of Francis fell on the leper (the other), he perceived the loveableness of the person, even in his misery. He felt the abundance of God’s goodness and love poured over his being in a way that revealed God’s love for all people. Also, Francis learned to be attentive to deeper truths and himself an instrument of God’s goodness.

What happened relationally? Francis showed a heart of mercy to the leper. He also began to welcome robbers and thieves with kindness, so that the “other” could experience a measure of the love and goodness of God. In reality, the reign of God was being realized, made present, and saving grace was offered and received in these encounters of mutuality.

To turn and be attentive to others came from Francis’ personal relationship with God in prayer and the recognition of his limitations. In contemplation an inner strength was developed that enabled Francis to be attentive to the reality of another’s situation. His way of seeing established a connection, a relationship, a response full of compassion (mercy). He could attend to others in their pain and stand in solidarity without judgment or criticism. Compassion created a first step toward healing for the other so that together they could experience the charity of God.

Francis was able to arouse a renewed sensitivity to human beings and their problems. He sought to alleviate the conditions that made it difficult for people to live in harmony, conditions that were the source of ever increasing suffering. He always valued the person above all else. Any minister of the Gospel, in his eyes, must be one who is directly responsible for promoting the welfare both of the individual and of the whole human community.²

THE INTENTIONS OF THE FOUNDERS

The Franciscan charism flowed through the 14 founders of the FSPA when they immigrated from

Bavaria to America in 1849. In the first printed edition of the Constitutions (1869), the care of the sick was noted as a primary objective of the sisters. To that end, a hospital was founded in 1883 when local La Crosse physicians and city officials requested that the congregation collaborate with them in serving the health needs of the area. This mission of health care found further expression in 1903 with the founding of a hospital in Carroll, Iowa, in 1915 and in mid-1950s with the building and staffing of hospitals in rural communities of Wisconsin and Idaho. Sisters worked in Guam, China and El Salvador. Care of the elderly was integrally a part of all of these efforts.

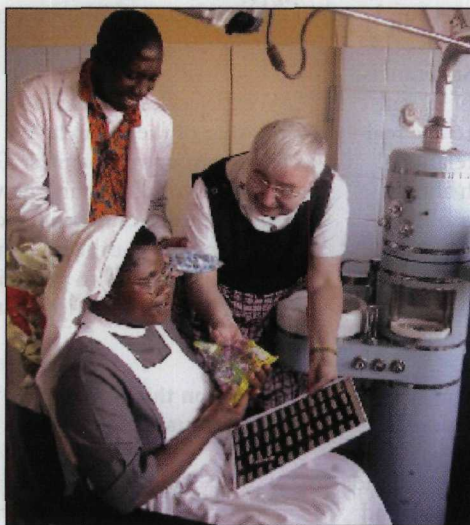
In 1995, the affiliation with Mayo Health System provided a new structure for the congregation's mission through a dual sponsorship of the current ministry in La Crosse, Wis. This brief historical outline serves to illustrate the clear intentions of the founders from the beginning. The congregation continues its active sponsorship in the ministry of health care.

THE CONTEMPORARY REALITY OF A MODERN AND GLOBALIZED MISSION

The story of St. Francis has been adapted to our times in a way that furthers relationships for sake of the mission. In addition to the traditional provision of a health care service, the FSPA have responded to the modern world in two specific ways — by establishing collaboration with medical providers and the professionals of integrative therapies in a local setting and globally by establishing a companion relationship with a Franciscan community in Cameroon in West Africa.



Responding to current data indicating that 74 percent of Americans seek complementary or alternative forms of healing, the FSPA in collaboration with Franciscan Skemp Healthcare sponsored by FSPA and the Mayo Foundation, provided leadership and funds for the establishment of a health and healing center at one of its local clinics in 2006. Specifically in this center and throughout the system, physicians and professionals in alternative therapy fields (e.g., massage, yoga, reiki, tai chi chih, healing touch), acupuncturists, and spiritual guides form a team for integrative healing of the person.



Above and below: Franciscan Sisters have a globalized mission to assist people in need.

Demonstrating a spirit of mutuality and cross-cultural understanding, a response to the globalization of mission was found among three U.S.-based communities of Franciscan women religious³ that developed the “Common Venture” project as a way to celebrate their common history. Wanting to have an international impact, a relationship was developed almost a decade ago with the Tertiary Sisters of St. Francis in Cameroon with the goal of creating systemic change. The result was a relationship through which the sisters mutually sought to discover the deeper meaning of their vocation and their community mission, seek resources to further the Cameroon ministry, and invite other organizations to support their work.

The common venture effort has inspired a “minor revolution” in aid efforts in Cameroon and beyond. It has brought education and training programs, improved health care access, supplies and medicine, medical volunteers, and other enhancements to this African nation. The U.S. communities have intensified their call to the Gospel value of conversion while helping other impoverished peoples to develop long-term solutions to problems.

FRANCISCAN ABIDING PRESENCE

The Franciscan values we model our lives upon are the values through which we seek to serve the challenges of ministry today. In a Eucharistic way we choose to give abiding presence to the “joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties⁴ of our brothers and sisters whose human and spiritual needs have not yet been adequately served.”

Francis did not provide answers and solutions like our modern day world expects of us. The style of St. Francis' presence shapes our ministry by calling us to be more attentive to the reality of the other, and in this relational attentiveness to see the truth about human suffering in the midst of great needs. St. Francis teaches us to be compassionate "wherever we are, in every place, at every hour, at every time of day, every day and continually."⁷⁵

In our contemporary dialogue with the leper, we desire to compassionately embrace the needs of the other as we encounter them with feet on the ground and with attentive compassion. We find the characteristics of our health care sponsorship:

- contributes to the public identity and corporate ecclesial dimension of the congregation.

- arises from the heart of the congregation's charism and mission in communion with the broader church on the local and global levels.

- is nourished by the characteristic spirituality of the congregation.

- is expressed in thoughtful, intentional and passionate responses to the Gospel in touch with the institutional challenges of contemporary society.

- is articulated in a civil law structure which recognizes the religious congregation and allows it to exercise

its canonical stewardship responsibilities in governance.

"We are ecclesial women whose mission is that of the Church. We are sent as Jesus was sent to manifest God's love in the world; to bring new meaning and hope to a suffering and searching humanity; to heal with compassion and forgiveness; and to proclaim the Gospel in word and action."⁷⁶ ■

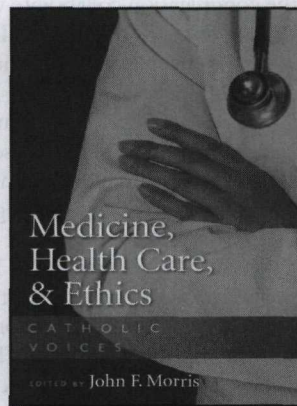


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NOTES

1. Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, n. 1.
2. www.hnp.org/publications/hnppfocus/ministry. This summary is inspired by Edward Coughlin, OFM. His writing interprets ideas found in the publications of Michael Blastic, OFM Conv., who proposed that contemplation and compassion are persuasive characteristics of a Franciscan style of ministry.
3. The Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration of La Crosse, Wis., The Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi of Milwaukee, Wis., and The Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist of Meriden, Conn. All three congregations share a common founding and founders.
4. *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, n. 1.
5. The Later Rule (1223), ch. 23, n. 11.
6. *Unity in Diversity*, Constitutions of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, n. 37.

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