

A REFLECTION

‘Becoming What We Pray’

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“When the people of God become what we pray, the Kingdom of God is revealed.”
— FR. JAMES MARCHIONDA, OP

Recently, at a pastoral gathering known as a parish mission, Fr. Jim Marchionda combined his love of music with his preaching skills to inspire and nourish our spirits. I frequently listen to music on my commutes to and from the hospital, so I purchased one of his CDs, knowing it would come in handy.

One evening I was reflecting on a meeting where we prioritized the issues most in need of attention according to our community health needs assessment, and the challenges our community is facing — mental health, chronic disease management, obesity, access to care, poverty, lack of educational resources and more. How can we make a difference, with all the challenges our communities are facing? I was feeling a bit overwhelmed.

To quiet my mind and seek some spiritual assistance, I played my new CD, and the lyrics from Fr. Marchionda’s “Becoming What We Pray” resonated with me in a new and divine way. The song calls us to the corporal works of mercy, including to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and house the homeless. It also calls us to respect the Earth and be tolerant beyond our fears. I listened to the song twice during my commute home and was able to temporarily set aside the worries of the day.

Over the next few days, I returned to thinking about our health needs assessment and how we would begin to make a difference. I thought about how some issues have been with us since biblical

time and even before then. Poverty, oppression, famine, disease and war still plague our current times, though our technologies and abilities to be connected as a global family have progressed greatly.

Instead of again going to a place of pity, I remembered that Jesus promised his newly commissioned disciples in Matthew’s Gospel, “I am with you always, even until the end of the age.” His covenant still rings true for us today.

So what does all of this mean? I turned to the spirit of Fr. Marchionda’s message, that we must

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truly put into action those things for which we have prayed. We must be doers of the word to bring about the Kingdom of God. For each one of us that action may look very different. However, we are unified as the church's ministry of health care; we have committed to care for the poor and vulnerable.

I return to a vision statement of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services to have a "nation free of disparities in health and health care." These commitments are, in a way, our prayers, and including these foundational ideas in our health care strategies and plans allows them to become a reality.

Fr. Marchionda's ministry of preaching and music has given me the opportunity to look at my prayer life, discernment and even strategic planning through a different lens. Perhaps from this I have a better understanding of the "faith and works" discourses we find throughout Scripture. If I just pray for the poor and underserved to have shelter, food, health care coverage and for other socially just initiatives but don't act using the means I have, then how in good conscience can I pray, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done?"

Just as the Lord promises to be with us until the end of time, we will also have those in need and the vulnerable, our sisters and brothers, with us until the end of time; therefore, I believe it is a moral imperative to advocate and work on their behalf. Whether this is on the local level through a community health needs assessment implementation plan to improve services, whether providing more transportation or greater health care access, or nationally to expand coverage through the Affordable Care Act or expanding Medicare as an option for all, we must act.

As persons of faith we have heard the call from religious leaders throughout the history of Christendom down to Pope Francis to have special consideration for the poor. Perhaps Pope Leo XIII states it best in *Rerum Novarum* #37, "The poor and badly off have a claim to special consideration. The richer class has many ways of shielding themselves and stand less in need of help from

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the state, whereas the mass of the poor have no resources of their own to fall back upon, and must chiefly depend upon the assistance of the state."

In the song "Becoming What We Pray," Fr. Marchionda notes: "It is not up to God alone to listen to prayer. It is not up to God alone to answer." For it is "when believers truly practice what we pray, then the world will be transformed." Maybe then and only then will we begin to bring about the Kingdom of God and the healing ministry of Jesus, drawing from the charisms of our founding religious orders and communities. As a country and as member ministries of the Catholic Health Association, we have been richly blessed, and with this blessing comes great opportunities and responsibilities.

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