

A SIGN OF HOPE, 30 YEARS LATER

Imagine writing a letter, or rather an explanatory email today, to colleagues and that email remaining relevant and incisive more than a generation later. That's exactly what happened when I recently reread "A Sign of Hope," by the late Archbishop of Chicago Cardinal Joseph Bernardin. This was a pastoral letter on health care, released nearly 30 years ago on October 18 (the feast of St. Luke, the physician). Pastoral letters typically pertain to the people within a bishop's diocese, yet the content, message and timing of this one reached from shore to shore.



**DARREN M.
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Last year, when Pope Francis designated 2025 the Jubilee Year of Hope, I pondered connections to health care, and my mind jumped to Bernardin's pastoral letter. As I dusted off the booklet from my shelf, I rediscovered key themes and passages that remain compelling and fuel hope today.

First, Bernardin made a bold statement "that health care is a ministry of the entire community of faith, the Church. Indeed, it is an essential ministry. Therefore, each health care ... system should see itself as part of the whole Church..."¹ Continuing to enact the healing ministry of Jesus in the 21st century is an essential ministry and activity of the community of faith and not merely a nicety.

Second, there are obstacles inherent to this work and ministry, and Bernardin names both internal and external challenges. These parallel his observations on the tensions between ministry and the business of doing health care. These tensions remain perennial weeds among our work.

Third, Bernardin appeals to social issues. He was masterful at weaving points from the Catholic social tradition into his remarks and homilies.

The pastoral letter notes the need for human solidarity and community. In addition, he called for compassion and to promote the common good.

Fourth, the social issues are not abstract ideas for him. Rather, these are integral to the Catholic imagination, which can only be fed and formed by attending to the spiritual and theological formation of a vision that health care is more than the delivery of a service. "Economic, technological, systemic and medical realities are not enemies.

Rather, it is also to them that we bring our ministry of Christian hope."² In other words, our very presence and contributions to the wider field of health care, medicine, nursing, counseling, wellness and more help form and inform them. Our ministries bring an added dimension of the Reign of God to the business and contractual relations, which, in turn, sparks reflection for our partners on what matters most and how they may contribute more justly to the needs of society and those served.

REFLECTING BACK

When I realized this would be the pastoral letter's 30th anniversary, I contacted Fr. Michael Place. Not only is he CHA's past CEO and president who served from 1998 to 2005, but he was Bernardin's theologian prior to that, contributing research and drafts for speeches and major works, includ-



ing “A Sign of Hope.” I was curious if my reading of the pastoral letter resonated with the author’s intention. We sat down together to reflect on the pastoral letter in light of the current environment.

Fr. Place, what remains relevant in Bernardin’s pastoral letter for us today, 30 years later?

Well, Part One does. As I reflected back to the time, I wondered, were we just talking to ourselves, or did the pastoral message have more value than the five years or so around the time of the letter? But I think it still works, at least for me.

Yes! It works for me as well. Rereading the letter, I noticed a lens that Bernardin offers in the opening pages. He says the Genesis story “does not describe a cosmic battle in which order triumphs over chaos once and for all. ... But chaos continues to exist. It is a part of life. At times, it can seem to get the upper hand and overcome the order, purpose and sense of meaning in our lives. But God’s creative work is ongoing. God continues to order the chaos we encounter, making it possible for us to live our lives under his protection.”³

Hope is all over the place in Bernardin’s writing. I was looking for a quote recently and did a word search of several speeches, and it’s everywhere. I had no idea how pervasive it is.

For the health care pastoral, I wanted to find a leitmotif that had a scriptural grounding to it, rather than a dogmatic warrant. The experience of illness predates dogma, our receipt of it. Jesus, as healer, was in continuity with the experience of the Hebrew people, who knew God as healer. We should begin in that space, not in the space of ecclesial ministry, which tends to get structural. We land there, but the beginning of the letter starts with experience, which was Bernardin’s style.

Part One, on the promise of life in the midst of chaos and hope in the Christian life, still works for me. Now, you have to stand inside a faith heritage to appreciate it. If you’re just appropriating a business, I don’t think it would be a convincing argument for someone with no faith background. Whether they might find affinity or resonance, that’s another thing. Chaos is chaos. The hope comes not from the chaos, but from outside of it.

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin’s main point in Part One of “A Sign of Hope” is that “God’s creative activity includes the promise that we are able to live our lives, even in the face of the chaos of illness and death. God’s promise of life is the basis for Christian hope.”⁴

Bernardin then states what he means by “hope.” He writes, “The hope of which I speak is an attitude about life and living in God’s loving care. Hope, rooted in our trust of God’s love for us in Christ, gives us strength and confidence; It comforts us with the knowledge that, whatever is happening to us, we are loved by God through Christ.”⁵

— DARREN HENSON

What needs do you see for spiritual formation among health care leaders in the ministry today, so they can be grounded in and offer the kind of Christian hope illuminated in this letter?

We have to orient people to God. We have to begin with where their human yearnings are. I’ve seen success when people have an experience of personal transformation. The feedback on ministry formation has been that it’s been life-changing. They’re better people and leaders, and they know there is more out there for them to encounter.

‘NO PATH FORWARD WITHOUT PRAYER’

Fr. Place’s comments on spirituality echoed those he gave in a talk to a gathering of Catholic health ministries in Illinois, where he revisited “A Sign of Hope.” His insights are worth reprinting and an apt closing to this homage to Bernardin’s “A Sign of Hope”:

I am convinced that there is no path forward without prayer. What we are about is a powerful vision of the best of being human, but we are about more than a vision. What we are about can enlighten and inspire, but we are about more than inspiration. What we are about requires the hard labor and creativity of many, but we are about more than human thought and labor.

Our “more” is nothing less than being the individuals who are personally called and sent by Christ to proclaim “the Gospel to the poor” and “to heal the brokenhearted” (Luke 4:18, KJV), and in so doing to be the individuals who proclaim that the Reign of God is at hand. Our “more” is something that is deeply personal. It is about you and I, and our Saving God. It is about being in relationship, a deeply personal relationship with the one who died and rose to save us and sent His Spirit to be with us until He comes again in triumph at the end of time.

For this personal relationship to flourish, it needs to be nourished like all relationships. Thus, the importance is that as individuals and as organizations, we be intentional about nurturing the spirit and reality of prayer. Which is to say, we nurture the possibility that individually and collectively, the presence of God can be encountered. We are not about an ideology.

We are about a living person, Jesus Christ.⁶

For this, we are signs of hope, as we continue to commit ourselves as leaders of this essential ministry that is part of the whole Church.

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NOTES

1. Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, *A Sign of Hope: A Pastoral Letter on Healthcare* (Archdiocese of Chicago, 1995), 9.
2. Bernardin, *A Sign of Hope*, 16.
3. Bernardin, *A Sign of Hope*, 2.
4. Bernardin, *A Sign of Hope*, 3.
5. Bernardin, *A Sign of Hope*, 3.
6. Rev. Michael D. Place, STD, “‘A Sign of Hope’ Revisited: A Work of Justice” and “‘A Sign of Hope’: Will They Be Our Future?” (presented at the Illinois Catholic Health Association Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL, October 6, 2023).



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