



# Advocacy as an Expression of Charity

By SR. DORIS GOTTEMOELLER, RSM, PhD

*“Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, suffering dreadfully.” (Matthew 8:6)*

**W**e might label this instance of pleading on the part of the biblical centurion “intercessory prayer,” or we could call it “advocacy.” However, personally asking Jesus to cure someone seems different from asking Congress or a state legislature to ensure health care resources for the poor, an activity we call advocacy today. Yet there is a parallel between the two actions. Pleading for another, whether through intercessory prayer or political advocacy, is an expression of charity, the greatest of virtues.

Before leaving the biblical inspiration, let’s look at a few more instances of special pleading or advocacy:

- The request of the Canaanite for a cure for her daughter (Matthew 15:21-28) indicates that Jesus’ compassion extended beyond the people of Israel to the “stranger”
- The healing of the paralytic who was lowered through the roof by his friends (Matthew 9:1-8) demonstrates that ingenuity in pleading for another can be valuable
- The inability of Jesus’ disciples to cure the son of a man suffering from a demon (Matthew 17:14-20) shows the importance of faith.
- The request of the mother of James and John for a special place for her sons (Matthew 20:20-28) shows how advocacy can be self-serving

Fast-forward to today, to survey the extent of resources dedicated to advocacy within the Catholic Church community. Limiting ourselves to the United States, we can identify the staffs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Office of Justice, Peace and Human Develop-

ment; the 50 state Catholic conferences; professional organizations such as the Catholic Health Association<sup>1</sup>, the National Catholic Educational Association and Catholic Charities USA; and, finally, the multiple Catholic health systems. It’s safe to say that many hundreds of talented men and women are working full-time advocating on behalf of their respective missions.

## ADVOCACY AND LOBBYING

To focus our discussion somewhat, we will define advocacy as the effort to influence public policy and legislation on behalf of the church’s mission. Most of us at some time probably have added our name to a petition or a letter to a legislator, usually via the Internet, thus becoming advocates for some action. In this reflection, however, we want to look at the work of persons employed to do advocacy as their major work commitment. When advocates focus their efforts on influencing their elected representatives and public officials on a specific matter, the activity also can be described as lobbying.





Illustration by Roy Scott



It isn't hard to find justification for our advocacy efforts. The Catholic Church and its institutions are the contemporary voice for a body of social teaching that envisions a more just and compassionate society. The bedrock of this social teaching is the belief in the inherent dignity of each person, made in God's image. Whatever his or her race, ethnicity, national origin, education, talent, financial status — all are children of God. Insuring the well-being of each, the opportunity to grow to maturity and utilize his or her personal gifts constitutes the common good. Seeing others deprived of the opportunity to flourish calls on each of us to respond, in both charity and justice.

The complexities of today's world require us to go beyond personal assistance to someone suffering from hunger or poor health. We need to address the systems and institutions that perpetuate these conditions or that impede the common good.

In his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI emphasizes that our charity must be more than individual acts: "Love of neighbor ... is also a responsibility for the entire ecclesial community at every level: from the local community to the particular Church and to the Church universal in its entirety. As a community, the Church must practice love. Love thus needs to be organized if it is to be an ordered service to the community."<sup>2</sup>

Organization implies different roles, including advocacy. The advocate analyzes the barriers to the common good and identifies promising remedies, whether political or legislative. Actually crafting the solution, drafting a new law, may fall to another, but promoting the remedy in the public domain in an intelligent and respectful way is the stuff of advocacy.

While it's easy to talk about this from the 30,000-foot level, there are distinct challenges on the ground. Here are three interrelated challenges that an effective Catholic advocate will encounter:

■ **The education and formation of church members in the church's social teaching.** Baptism initiates one into the family of the faithful, but Christian maturity requires a lifelong growth in understanding and commitment. For some, this occurs in Catholic schools and universities or in well-designed parish instruction classes and ancillary activities. For all, the Sunday Eucharistic celebration is intended to be a source of ongoing nourishment. The Catholic Church has a rich

intellectual and spiritual tradition that is a gift to be passed on: the Bible, church history, the sacraments, moral teachings, the great doctrines of the Trinity and the church and more.

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Where, in the process of Christian maturation, do we learn about the church's social teachings and their application to today's realities? An occasional 10-minute Sunday sermon or an article in the Catholic press (for those who read a diocesan newspaper or national periodical) probably constitute the only opportunities. The bedrock tenets of social teaching — human dignity, justice, the common good, the preferential option for the poor, a just wage, etc. — have been articulated richly in various papal and episcopal statements, but these are not familiar to the majority of Catholics. Still less are they familiar to community leaders who do not share our faith tradition. As a result, the great commandment to love one's neighbor is seen by many to be fulfilled by acts of charity, without any obligation to examine the causes of the neighbor's need and to advocate for a remedy.

■ **The need for skill in prudential judgment.** The circumstances that impede the common good in today's world are many and complex. Thus, crafting solutions that apply to whole populations is extremely challenging. What might be the unintended, as well as the intended, consequences of some new social policy? How might we mitigate the former and strengthen the latter?

We can look at the familiar example of Medicare to illustrate the tension. Millions of citizens have enjoyed dignity and security in their senior years because of this program that they financed through their taxes during their working years. Is there fraud and abuse in the program? Yes, without a doubt. But this is where the need for prudential judgment comes in. The catechism defines prudence as "the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern the true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it." Is the current program the "right means" to achieve the "true good" of health care security for



the elderly? The majority of our citizens would probably give a strong “yes” but acknowledge that the means always can be adjusted to improve the program and minimize the abuses.

This one example illustrates the professional health care advocate’s challenge. There are many social goods to be sought: access to adequate health care for all, workforce development, pricing transparency, funding for strategic needs, improved technology, physician relations, etc. What should be the current priority? How does it align with the legislator’s agenda? Who are the likely partners to align with in achieving the objective?

These questions raise the issues of partisanship and collaboration with others whose total agendas might not align with ours. They are additional challenges to the advocate’s prudential judgment. They also have implications for our next challenge.

■ **The maintenance and promotion of communion within the church.** The unity of the whole people of God is one of the marks of the church. However, the complexity of circumstances that impede the common good can lead to differences of opinion about possible solutions among people who share the same values. CHA’s support for the Affordable Care Act, despite the opposition of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, is an example most readers will remember. Despite this public disagreement, the leaders of both organizations took steps to deepen their understanding of one another’s viewpoint and to repair any perceived breach in communion.

As noted above, effective advocacy sometimes requires collaborating with others whose agendas might not align with ours in some areas. The U.S. bishops are currently studying the issue of collaboration with a view to updating the *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*. Their focus is on structural alignments at the governance or management level; collaboration in advocacy is a more limited risk. However, some care also needs to be taken to avoid scandal when collaborating with other organizations in this area by clarifying the specific good being sought.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Genuine love of one’s neighbor is practical. (It also is patient, kind, neither jealous nor pompous;

it does not seek its own interests . . . compare this to St. Paul’s letters to the Corinthians.)

Pope Francis points out that the great social principles remain mere generalities which challenge no one unless they are used to draw practical conclusions.

“Consequently, no one can demand that religion should be relegated to the inner sanctum of personal life, without influence on societal and national life, without concern for the soundness of civil institutions, without a right to offer an opinion on events affecting society,” he writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*.<sup>3</sup> Forming carefully considered opinions and promoting them in the public square is a ministry that some are privileged to lead.

To return to the long-ago biblical centurion who “advocated” for his servant: His prayer was for an individual person. Today’s advocate seeks help for whole populations, the uninsured, the disabled, the elderly, the homeless and others. The centurion spoke directly to Jesus; today’s advocate speaks to citizens who control the purse strings of public funds or control public policy.

What Jesus remarked on was the faith of the centurion: “In no one in Israel have I found such faith.” (Matthew 8:10) Faith is the foundation of today’s advocacy as well, as our colleagues entrusted with this ministry seek to translate the enduring love of God into practical responses.

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## NOTES

1. Michael Rodgers, senior vice president for public policy and advocacy at the Catholic Health Association, estimates that 8 percent to 10 percent of CHA’s total budget is allocated to public policy and/or legislative advocacy.
2. Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 20.
3. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 183.

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