

An MPJP Contemplates Charism, Calling and the Future

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The story of Catholic health care spans generations, continuing to serve as an unbroken link to the healing ministry of Jesus. Through the Spirit's creative provision, the unique charisms that strengthened and sustained the sisters and brothers who went before us continue today in the hearts and minds of lay and religious alike.

The Spirit's contemporary involvement in the Catholic healing ministry is evidenced by creation of the ministerial public juridic person (MPJP), which builds on the heritage and traditions of our founders — all while opening the door to lay leadership within an increasingly complex health care landscape. We do not view this changing face of sponsorship as a loss; rather, we envision it as the next chapter in an unfolding narrative, only made possible by a flourishing partnership of our local health ministries, the Ascension Sponsor, local diocesan bishops and the Holy See.

THE MINISTERIAL PUBLIC JURIDIC PERSON

The Second Vatican Council brought about, among other gifts, a renewed sense of purpose for laity within the Catholic Church. Through time, several Catholic health care systems that were founded by particular religious congregations sought ways to formalize their identity and fidelity to the church within a new construct. They eventually found their solution in the MPJP, which represented an opportunity to formally link an organizational ministry to the institutional church. Simply put, the MPJP links us to the church and the church to us.

Canon 116 defines “public juridic person” as “aggregates of persons (*universitates personarum*) or of things (*universitates rerum*) which are constituted by competent ecclesiastical authority so that, within the purposes set out for them, they

fulfill in the name of the church, according to the norm of the prescripts of the law, the proper function entrusted to them in view of the public good; other juridic persons are private.”

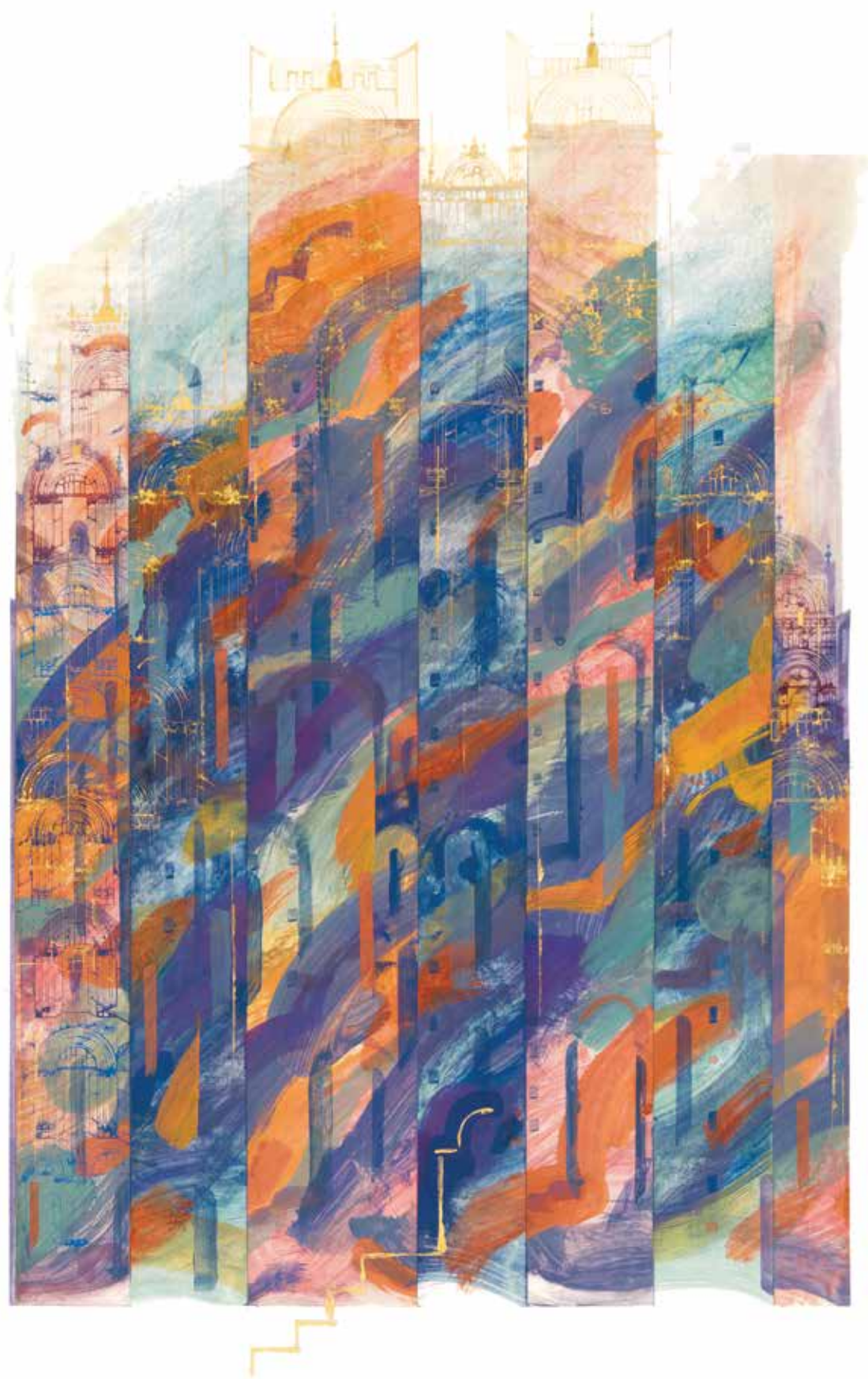
As Fr. Gerald A. Arbuckle, SM, PhD, attests in a September-October 2006 *Health Progress* article titled “Sponsorship's Biblical Roots and Tensions,” we know sponsorship is much deeper than a legal relationship between Ascension and the institutional church.

“A more pastoral and developmental definition,” wrote Fr. Arbuckle, is “... *the devising of ways to guarantee or ensure that the healing and educating mission of Christ continues within the church through particular ministries, in light of rapidly changing circumstances in both society and the church.* This definition emphasizes the fact

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that sponsorship is a prophetic action — that is, a bridging of the gap between the Gospel and contemporary realities.”

The final line in Ascension's vision statement reflects this idea of the MPJP: “We will expand the



ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE ASCENSION SPONSOR

The graphic below provides a visual representation of the Ascension Sponsor and Ascension. Currently, the sponsor is composed of five participating entities: one individual designated by each participating entity acts as its represen-

tative to appoint the members of the Ascension Sponsor and exercises reserved powers as needed. The Ascension Sponsor then appoints the Ascension board, which then appoints the president/CEO to lead Ascension and its subsidiaries.



SPONSORSHIP TIMELINE

1727 Congregations of Catholic sisters, brothers and priests began to establish and operate what have become the largest nonpublic health care systems in the United States.

1983 A new form of juridic person, first described in the *Code of Canon Law*, is distinguished from other juridic persons in that laity join with religious and clergy in the structure to carry out the role and responsibilities of sponsorship.

1991 The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life formally established Catholic Health Care Federation as a ministerial public juridic person of the Catholic Church. Catholic Health Care Federation was the first of many to attain MPJP status.

1999 Ascension Health formed when four provinces of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul (now known as the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Province of St. Louise) and the Sisters of St. Joseph of Nazareth (now known as the Congregation of St. Joseph) came together to create a cosponsored organization. A 10-member sponsors'

council was formed and operated under a "sponsorship of the whole" concept. Later, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, the Alexian Brothers and the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother joined the sponsors council.

2010 Recognizing the need to evolve our sponsorship structure even further, we submitted a petition to grant Ascension Health Ministries the status of MPJP of Pontifical Right.

2011 The CICLSAL approved the petition, and Ascension Health Ministries became formally recognized by the church as the Ascension Sponsor. A single, ministerial structure enabled responsible stewardship and opened the doors for strengthening Catholic health care as a whole.

2017 The Ascension Sponsor is now a 10-person group that embodies five participating entities, including laypersons and members of the historic sponsors of Ascension alike. As depicted in the graphic above, we leave a "potential new participating entity" open for other sponsored ministries that show an interest in joining Ascension.

— *Anthony Tersigni*



role of the laity, in both leadership and sponsorship, to ensure a Catholic health ministry in the future.”

Indeed, to ensure the continuation of our Catholic ministry identity, we have bridged the gap through encouraging more laypeople to become actively involved in sponsorship. We currently have four deeply committed laypersons who serve on the Ascension Sponsor, working hand-

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in-hand with members of our historic sponsors to shepherd our national health ministry into the future. Furthermore, through the good work of our mission integration program, we affirm that every person serving in governance, management and delivery of services embodies the mission and identity of Ascension, rooted in the healing ministry of Jesus.

WHAT IS A CHARISM?

Although the time our founders walked this earth varied, the Spirit weaves a common thread among all of them. In every account, each of the individual founders of our historic sponsors saw a great need within the church, and, powered by Christ’s love, they dedicated their life to addressing it. In response to his or her calling, they “lived into” that passion, and the fruits of their labor — through the Spirit’s rendering — became known in time as that person’s gift or charism. This special gift that was bestowed on our individual founders did not point others to them; rather, it drew followers closer to God and to the church. Their charisms were so strong that they shaped the spirit and identity of entire communities. Those communities organized a way of life that continued the spirit of the founders.

In her book *Religious Life at the Crossroads*:

A School for Mystics and Prophets, Sr. Amy Herford, CSJ, JD, JCD, describes the rich story of religious congregations in this way:

“Each religious institute is the recipient and guardian of such a gift or charism. The founding members received the gift or charism in a particular way and had the task of articulating that charism for the time and place in which they found themselves. Generally, this involved a particular experience of God, community, and mission. The experience of God gave rise to a spirituality and spiritual tradition that grew in depth and clarity over time with each succeeding generation. The experience of community enabled the group to grow and attract new members to live it.”

OUR CALLING

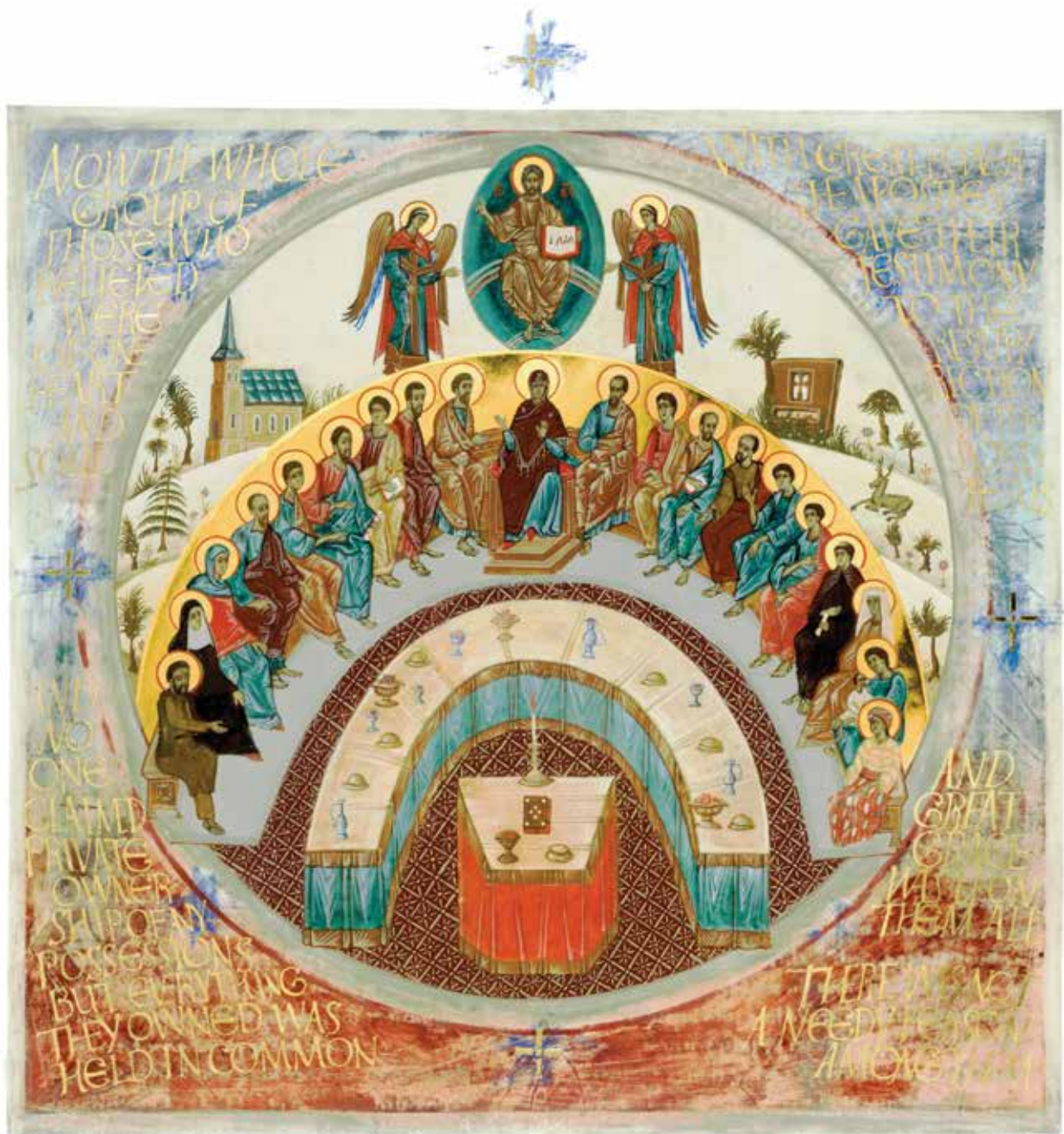
Our MPJP, the Ascension Sponsor, currently comprises 10 members who work together to steward our Catholic identity and mission. Throughout the unfolding narrative of the Ascension Sponsor, we continue to pose a most important, fundamental question: “How do we, as a ministry of the church, aware of the vibrant story of our ministry’s origins, experience our calling now to address the needs of the church today and into the future?” This question becomes increasingly important in light of the evolving health care landscape.

It also raises an even more foundational question, “What is our charism?”

That question became the focus of several Ascension Sponsor meetings. With the help of Rev. Charles Bouchard, OP, STD, senior director, theology and ethics, at the Catholic Health

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Association in St. Louis, the Ascension Sponsor engaged in dialogue about its emerging gift. Out of that formative meeting came a very profound awareness: A charism is not something that can be named or chosen for oneself; rather, it is a gift



bestowed by God. The individual experiences a calling, a vocation. God then gifts that individual with a charism so vibrant that it draws others, calling them to the same services. It emerges over time and often is not named for many years.

Just as we do not expect a seed sown in the fall to bear fruit immediately, we recognize that the MPJP is a new entity and, as such, we know we are not yet finished growing. We see the MPJP as a response to the needs of the church today. It is a reality we continue to nurture and co-create.

The question our Ascension Sponsor then

began to explore is, “What is our vocation, our calling?” This undertaking renewed the Ascension Sponsor’s sense of being called to inspire and encourage — recognizing a strong call to encourage creativity, encourage risk-taking and encourage courage itself in fulfillment of our mission.

I see this as particularly true with regard to the last line of our mission statement, which encompasses so much more than health care: “Ascension is an advocate for a compassionate and just society through our actions and words.”

I am grateful for the great work the Ascension



As a coalition of analogous organizations, we have enormous potential to collaborate on creative, courageous ways to bring about the reign of God through Catholic health care.

Sponsor has accomplished thus far and look forward to the gifts the Spirit will bestow on it in the future.

ONE VOICE

While on the subject of charisms, I think it important to pause and reflect on another important distinction regarding our identity within the larger body of MPJPs.

It is my belief that everyone has been given an individual calling. And just as individuals do not surrender their gifts when they join a religious congregation, their religious congregation's spirit does not diminish or change as a result of joining the MPJP. Quite the contrary. When a group comes together as one, the amalgamation

gives the Spirit an even stronger voice as it works to fulfill the needs of the time.

Bearing this in mind, I ponder how strong our voice could be as an assembly of MPJPs all working on behalf of our collective calling. Consider that of all the existing MPJPs in the world, 15 of them are located in the United States. As a coalition of analogous organizations, we have enormous potential to collaborate on creative, courageous ways to bring about the reign of God through Catholic health care.

I offer the following points of reflection for all MPJPs involved in the healing ministry of Christ:

■ What are the pressing needs in this time and this place in which we are called to serve and encourage others?

■ How can we honor the charism of our founders and the spirit of our congregations while living into the emerging vocation to which we are called?

■ How can we, as a collective group of MPJPs, minister to the church?

■ Is there a way that we can begin to share the constructs of our programs, tools and initiatives — such as formation and leadership development, as well as standards of excellence in ethics and spiritual care — for the benefit of all MPJPs?

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