

Bishops and Healthcare Leaders Explore Ministry Issues Together

At an extraordinary meeting, leaders in the Catholic healthcare ministry recently explored ministry issues with the U.S. bishops. Participants in a session at the bishops' general meeting in Washington, DC, in November 1991 said the session was a good beginning to a yearlong process in which the bishops are invited to assess their role in the Church's healing ministry.

Acknowledging that, as a group, bishops have not always been closely involved in healthcare, both bishops and healthcare representatives who participated in the session said the meeting provided an opportunity to open communication. "I was shocked when a bishop said he felt that hospitals had ignored the bishops and were coming to them now because they were in trouble," said one participant from a healthcare system. She explained to the bishop that, ironically, those in the healthcare ministry have felt that the bishops were not always interested in their problems. This mutual revelation, she said, opened the way for a fruitful discussion.

The 90-minute session, sponsored by the National Coalition on Catholic Health Care Ministry (see **Box**), was the first step in a three-



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part program to inform bishops about the ministry, said Bp. James W. Malone of Youngstown, OH, who introduced the session. "We have important challenges ahead of us," Bp. Malone said. Alluding to the large numbers of uninsured Americans, advances in technology, and serious debates about medical care for "the very young, the very old, and the very ill," he noted that the ministry is "undergoing profound changes and confronting questions that touch its very identity."

SESSION FORMAT

A brief video set the stage for later roundtable conversations. The video centered around a hypothetical case in which fictitious St. Gertrude Hospital was considering affiliating, through a jointly owned management corporation, with nonsectarian Rock Haven Community Hospital. After viewing the video, the bishops heard reactions from Sr. Rose Mary Pint, OSF, provincial directress of the Franciscan Sisters, Wheaton, IL; Theodore J. Druhot, president of St. Elizabeth's Hospital of Boston, Brighton, MA; Sr. Mary Roch Rocklage, RSM, president and CEO of the Sisters of Mercy Health System, St. Louis; and Abp. John R. Quinn of San Francisco.

NATIONAL COALITION ON CATHOLIC HEALTH CARE MINISTRY

The National Coalition on Catholic Health Care Ministry, which sponsored the meeting of Catholic healthcare leaders and the U.S. bishops, consists of the following members:

- Association of Catholic Health Science Centers
- Catholic Charities USA
- Catholic Health Association of the United States
- Conference of Major Superiors of Men

- Leadership Conference of Women Religious

- U.S. Catholic Conference/National Conference of Catholic Bishops

These organizations came together to implement the vision of the Commission on Catholic Health Care Ministry, which was expressed in its 1988 report, *Catholic Health Ministry: A New Vision for a New Century*. As part of that effort, the coalition organized the session at the U.S. bishops' general

meeting to promote understanding of the bishop's role with respect to the healthcare facilities in his diocese.

The session was the first part of a program the coalition plans for the year between the 1991 and 1992 November meetings of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. Other parts of the program are an optional diocesan day of reflection on the healthcare ministry and optional workshops for the bishops prior to their November 1992 meeting.



Rev. J. Bryan Hehir, ThD, professor of Christian ethics at Georgetown University, Washington, DC, then pointed to themes in healthcare brought out in the video. St. Gertrude, he said, is caught in social forces generating a crisis in American healthcare. As St. Gertrude embodies the values of the Catholic moral tradition, it represents the Church's vision of what healthcare ought to be. The case, he said, represents an opportunity for Catholic healthcare to make a contribution to society. The ministry's intellectual tradition, extensive network of institutions, and experience in caring for the sick and the poor enable it to be at the forefront of the health policy debate.

"This generation," Fr. Hehir continued, "has split the atom, cracked the genetic code, and pierced the veil of space." Our technological prowess, he said, gives us God-like power over life, which intensifies a double mandate for the healthcare ministry: to testify to both a social justice and a medical-moral mission. The Church's social justice tradition, he said, sees healthcare not as a business but as an ecclesial ministry rooted in the Gospel and the call to imitate Jesus. It sees healthcare as a right, a basic good that must be available to all persons. And the Church's medical-moral tradition seeks to protect the sacredness of the human person.

Fr. Hehir noted that this double mandate is entering a time of tension because it occurs in a civil context of religious pluralism and rapidly advancing technology, but he predicted that the

ministry can be a catalyst that sensitizes the wider society to the sacredness of life and the needs of the poor.

A SETTING FOR FUTURE DISCUSSION

After Fr. Hehir identified the issues embodied in the St. Gertrude case, 50 representatives of Catholic healthcare met with the bishops in small groups to explore the case's implications. In far-ranging discussions, the groups analyzed how to



Participating in small-group discussions were CHA President John E. Curley, Jr. (at center in left photo); and (in right photo) Sr. Patricia Underhill, SC, president and CEO, Mercy Health System, Cincinnati; and CHA board member Bp. Joseph M. Sullivan, DD (at right).

maintain Catholic identity in healthcare in the fictitious town of Rock Haven and the diocesan bishop's role in the affiliation.

After the discussion, several participants said the session was an exciting beginning to future communication. "The dialogue stimulated ideas," said Bp. John Snyder of St. Augustine, FL. He remarked that the meeting illustrated that the bishop needs to be involved in healthcare all the time, not just in a crisis. Bp. Elden F. Curtiss of Helena, MT, characterized the meeting as a "healthy sign that everyone is concerned with the Catholic dimension of healthcare."

"The meeting was a good way for our Church leaders to begin looking at the future of the Catholic healthcare ministry," said John E. Curley, Jr., CHA's president and CEO. "There is a real need for open communication in a time of extraordinary change."

William E. Kessler, CHA chairperson and the president and CEO of Saint Anthony's Health Center, Alton, IL, said, "The meeting has laid the groundwork. It's up to the provider community to further inform the bishops. They want to be involved."

—Judy Cassidy