

‘COME AND SEE!’

Living the Teachings of Pope Francis

BY EILEEN L. BARSÌ

“**I**n every human situation ... the Good News is no mere matter of words, but a testimony to unconditional and faithful love: it is about leaving ourselves behind and encountering others, being close to those crushed by life’s troubles, sharing with the needy, standing at the side of the sick, elderly and the outcast.”¹

These inspirational words of Pope Francis reflect the tradition of Catholic teaching and deeply resonate with the healing ministry of Jesus. As a community health professional with more than 25 years of Catholic health care service, I have witnessed that kind of love through community benefit programs implemented to optimize health in the communities we have been privileged to serve.

As I grasp the pope’s words, I envision many of the programs within our ministry. I see the faces of those our programs have touched, faces of people who have, indeed, been crushed by life’s troubles. I see communities of people where our focused efforts have brought the good news of hope and love.

HOPE STREET BRINGS REAL HOPE

Hope Street Family Center is a community program of California Hospital Medical Center in the heart of Los Angeles. It provides in-home and on-site educational, health wellness, behavioral health, developmental and social services to children and families. As is typical of many community benefit programs, Hope Street works with community partners to address comprehensive

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health needs, including the social, environmental and economic determinants of health — namely poverty, safety, education, employment and the like.

This brings to mind a young man I’ll call Sam whom the Hope Street staff met when he was a child. Sam’s father was absent. His mother was killed in a drive-by shooting. Though Sam had natural scholastic ability, his unstable home life overshadowed his schoolwork. With the support of various programs provided through the Hope Street Family Center, including its small learning community, Sam is now a high school graduate, a prolific writer and a recent recipient of the Huntington Library’s Langston Hughes Poetry Award. Sam has discovered his talent and is about to start college, ready to create his future in an uncertain world.

EMBRACING HUMAN LIFE

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis outlined where he wants the Catholic Church to go and what kind of church he wants it to be. “An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives,” he wrote, “it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself, if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. ... An evangelizing community is also supportive, standing by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be.”²

Isn’t that what many of our community benefit programs do: get involved in daily lives, embrace human life, touch the suffering in others, stand by people at every step?

Inaction carries a high price. We see it in our emergency departments every day. Where there is poverty, there is also a significant threat to health in the community. When financial resources are

limited, basic personal and family needs — food, shelter and transportation — take priority over regular preventive health care or even following a healthy lifestyle.

We live out the words of Pope Francis and touch lives when we offer free and discounted care through our financial assistance programs and when we enroll the uninsured in Medicaid or health insurance exchange programs for which they are eligible.

This reminds me of a patient navigator I'll call Maria who, as part of a hospital program, helps people through the health insurance enrollment process. She had the opportunity to help a young man who never had been insured and did not think he could possibly afford the premium for a health plan, even one offered with a government subsidy. Working with him to fully understand his financial situation, Maria discovered he was eligible to participate in the community's food support program, which would save him enough money to pay for a health insurance plan. Thanks to Maria's outreach, he left the hospital not only enrolled in a health insurance program for the first time, but also with access to support for food.

Similarly, we live out the pope's message to embrace human life when we provide health promotion programs and preventive services in the most socially compromised neighborhoods, addressing some of the pressing health concerns in our communities. We offer immunization programs that prevent disease, screenings to help identify health risks individuals may not even realize they are experiencing, education to heighten awareness about behaviors that are detrimental to health and evidence-based methods that enhance self-efficacy for individuals living with chronic conditions.

We embrace human life when a program's health navigator offers bilingual support and assistance to women who lack adequate health care coverage or

the financial means to obtain clinical breast exams, mammograms, ultrasounds, surgical consultations and biopsies. If such women are fighting breast cancer, the program provides compassionately coordinated care, from screening to treatment, along with such additional services as payment of monthly utilities, transportation costs, groceries, rent and other incidentals.

Inaction, the failure to stand by people at every step, carries a high price. We see it in our emergency departments every day.

At other times the work of Catholic health care is broader reaching, affecting a whole community, in Francis' words, "standing by people at every step of the way." Catholic hospitals and their community health programs can impact the socioeconomic barriers that put people at the highest risk of poor health. This happens through socially responsible investing and working with community partners for work training, job creation and affordable housing.

CHERISH THE EARTH

In his encyclical *Lumen Fidei*, Pope Francis calls on us to cherish Earth and its resources. In his words, "Faith, on the other hand, by revealing the love of God the Creator, enables us to respect nature all the more, and to discern in it a grammar written by the hand of God and a dwelling place entrusted to our protection and care. Faith also helps us to devise models of development which are based not simply on utility and profit, but consider creation as a gift for which we are all indebted."³

The environmental responsibil-

ity programs within our organizations, aimed at improving community health by improving environmental health, are testaments to how we endeavor to protect and care for Earth and its people who have been entrusted to us. These activities range from creating neighborhood community gardens and limiting our use of harmful chemicals to decreasing energy use and helping to create walking trails.

When we address the economic and environmental determinants of health, we are protecting our dwelling place and touching lives. This includes redevelopment of dilapidated properties for housing and economic development with social and ecological footprint considerations. It also includes working with local congregations, citizen groups, government agencies and community organizations to offer such things as food pantries, new and good-condition clothing, bus passes, emergency rent and assistance to pay for prescriptions, lodging or utility bills.

These stories are but a glimpse of the good works offered by Catholic health care, fulfilling the call of our mission with profound respect for the dignity of all God's children and of Earth. I invite you to share the good news and tell the stories about the impact that community health improvement efforts are making, and proclaim, as Pope Francis has, what a caring, loving community can accomplish: "Come and see! Love is more powerful, love gives life, love makes hope blossom in the wilderness."⁴

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NOTES

1. Francis, *Urbi et Orbi* message, Easter 2014.
2. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24.
3. Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 55.
4. *Urbi et Orbi*, Easter 2014.

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