

EDITOR'S NOTE

Because those who are vowed religious tend not to adopt a “hey, look at me” attitude toward their accomplishments, it may go largely unnoticed and unremarked upon in contemporary society that U.S. Catholic health care has an extraordinary legacy of leadership.



**BETSY
TAYLOR**

Women religious, brothers and priests raised funds and built hospitals where none existed in this country. They tended to wounded soldiers on battlefields, through smallpox outbreaks and in leprosy colonies. When I tell people that sisters were involved in the flourishing of the Mayo Clinic or the start of Alcoholics Anonymous, they're surprised.¹ CHA's members shaped a significant portion of health care in America and have done so with an unwavering commitment to those most in need of care.

How have they done this? With exceptional leadership. The first leader in Catholic health care I crossed paths with was Sr. Mary Jean Ryan, FSM, when I was a news reporter in eastern Missouri, and she made the bold call to eliminate smoking on SSM Health property about two decades ago as the system's president and CEO.² SSM Health was in the practice of preserving health, and the thinking was that a culture change and support might lead more people to give up the habit. At the time, it was almost shocking. Today, with greater recognition that environments and culture affect health, it seems less so. It was an idea ahead of its time.

The second leader I met was Sr. Mary Roch Rocklage, RSM, the late president and CEO of Mercy, well before I worked for CHA.³ I interviewed her for an article about how she successfully led an effort to contribute funds to support a St. Louis-area nursing program years prior. Within minutes of starting the interview, I was astonished. She easily walked me through what the issue had been and how she and others resolved it.

I'd had sisters as teachers as a child, and here was another who made an instant impression with her intellect and decision-making abilities, leading an entire health care system. She explained how a need was identified and how she got people on board to address it. If memory serves, I told her I hadn't known sisters held such leadership positions. They do in Catholic health care, she explained.

The list could (and does) go on and on of leaders in Catholic health care I both like and admire. For much of my career in rather fast-paced environments, I didn't fully understand when people talked about having mentors. Where were all these people that other

people wanted to emulate? When I came to CHA, I got to know so many people who led differently from what I had experienced in other workplaces: people who ground themselves in their faith, who read and listen widely, and don't jump to hasty decisions. When they set goals, they are massive and multifaceted: Let's transform and improve health care in the nation. I had always worked with bright, ethical, hard-working people, but these leaders, dare I say, lead with love. And like the sisters before them, they certainly didn't draw attention to what they were doing.

What is distinctive about leadership in Catholic health care? Several things. For starters, as a well-respected academic pointed out to me last summer, the bar of the Catholic health care mission is incredibly high: to be the healing ministry of Jesus Christ.

A bad day at the office is one thing in the usual workplace environment, but when you're supposed to be emulating Jesus in how you approach your work, you'd better hold yourself to a mighty high standard each and every day. Additionally, the amount of thought, time and attention our organizations put into spiritual, personal and professional formation of leaders is reflected throughout the work. While the ministry hires and promotes those with leadership attributes, it also spends a great deal of time thinking about how to cultivate and improve upon those skills.

It is not enough in this culture to lead — we must lead with integrity. Integrity is generally understood to be found in those with honesty and moral uprightness, and integrity also has another meaning: to be a unified whole. Strength can be found in a shared purpose, and everyone can lead in their own arenas. In this shared work, may we acknowledge our shortcomings and work on them, recognize the talents of others to knit together stronger organizations, and lift one another up.

NOTES

1. “Mayo Clinic Hospital, Saint Marys Campus,” Mayo Clinic, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/patient-visitor-guide/minnesota/campus-buildings-maps/mayo-clinic-hospital-saint-marys-campus>; “Sr. Ignatia,” Alcoholics Anonymous, <https://www.aa.org/sister-ignatia>.
2. “Sister Mary Jean Ryan, FSM,” Catholic Health Association, <https://www.chausa.org/about/awards/lifetime-achievement-award/sr-mary-jean-ryan-fsm>.
3. “Sister Mary Roch Rocklage,” Mercy, <https://www.mercy.net/about/mission/sister-mary-roch-rocklage/>.

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