

Raising Our Voices To Say Who We Are

BY ED GIGANTI

"Who do people say that I am?" (Mk 8:27).

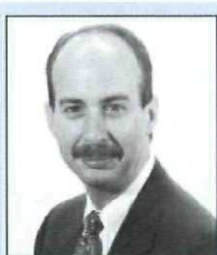
In the year 2000, Jesus' question in Caesarea Philippi echoes for Catholic health care organizations in the United States. Too often, in a health care marketplace repeatedly reconfigured by regulatory and economic pressures and consumer expectations, other voices are inaccurately describing our ministry. It is up to us to raise our voices to clearly say who we are.

This year, people in CHA member organizations across the country helped write a single statement of identity for the ministry. Physicians and nurses, chaplains and chief executives, trustees and technicians, and many others answered the question, "Who do we say that we are?" Their response, the brief but rich statement that follows, sounds from across America.

"We are the people of Catholic health care, a ministry of the church continuing Jesus' mission of love and healing today. As provider, employer, advocate, citizen—bringing together people of diverse faiths and backgrounds—our ministry is an enduring sign of health care rooted in our belief that every person is a treasure, every life a sacred gift, every human being a unity of body, mind, and spirit.

"We work to bring alive the Gospel vision of justice and peace. We answer God's call to foster healing, act with compassion, and promote wellness for all persons and communities, with special attention to our neighbors who are poor, underserved, and most vulnerable. By our service, we strive to transform hurt into hope."

Beyond this announcement, the identity of the Catholic health ministry is evident in a multitude of stories of care and service. The Sacred Stories project of Denver-based Catholic Health Initiatives (CHI) is an effort by that system to capture in narrative form reflections of its identity as healing ministry. The following story is by Sandra Greggo, a nursing assistant at St. Francis Care Center at Brackenville, a CHI long-term care facility in Hockessin, DE. It appeared in the book



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Sacred Stories published earlier this year by CHI.

"During the early hours of the morning, I attended to the needs of a terminally ill gentleman and mentioned to him that it had started to snow. In a very weak voice he said, 'I would so like to touch snow once more.'

"The snow continued to fall during the night. At 4:30 a.m., I took a tray outside, collected a mound of snow, and took it to his room. He was awake, and when I told him I had brought him snow to touch, he smiled. I placed the tray on his bed. He reached into the snow, picked up a handful and slowly rubbed it across his face, neck, forehead, and lips. He then closed his hand and held the snow until it melted.

"I stood and watched; there was such a sense of peace about him. I felt very happy that I was able to fulfill his wish. Less than two days later, he passed away."

A simple story about a small act of kindness, and yet this moment of tenderness between two people speaks of essential elements of Catholic health ministry: our respect for the dignity of persons, our special concern for those most vulnerable, our recognition that each person is a unity of body and spirit that leads us to address all dimensions of human need—physical, psychological, social, and spiritual.

The 2001 Catholic Health Assembly, June 10-13 in Atlanta, will examine the culture of Catholic health care that grows out of and reflects our ministry's identity. This will be an opportune event for sharing stories from the ministry—like Sandra Greggo's—that reveal our identity. In preparation for the Assembly, CHA is gathering stories from across the ministry that could be incorporated into the program. People in ministry organizations are invited to submit stories to Ed Giganti, director, leadership development and programs, at CHA, 4455 Woodson Road, St. Louis, MO 63134, or by e-mail, egiganti@chausa.org. We are called to speak our identity in society. We are moved to tell our stories of compassion and healing. By boldly claiming our identity—in unison—we draw strength as we "strive to transform hurt into hope." □