

Healthcare's Brother Joseph

BY EUGENE KENNEDY, PhD

Mount Carmel Cemetery lies 12 miles west of Chicago, at the very beginning of the prairie. On a slight rise on the otherwise altar-flat earth stands the Bishops' Chapel, in which Card. Joseph Bernardin was entombed just after sunset the week before Thanksgiving. Floodlights illuminated eddies of falling snow as thousands of people sang "Amazing Grace" into the darkening night.

Meditating before Card. Bernardin's place of rest, one is struck by how the mausoleum and the cemetery reflect a period in American Catholic history. Inside the cemetery gates is a great circle for the burial of priests, a place as special as theirs was in the building era of Catholicism. Beyond the circle, quadrants of headstones recreate old Catholic neighborhoods, whose music seems to rise from the Irish clustered here and the Italians huddled together there. At the center, elevated above priests and parishioners, are the bishops, in a soaring structure built in 1902 by the pennies of poor Catholics.

The landscape of Mount Carmel reflects the

Dr. Kennedy is professor emeritus of psychology at Loyola University and a writer.

*His biography of Card. Bernardin, **Bernardin: Life to the Full**, has just been published.*

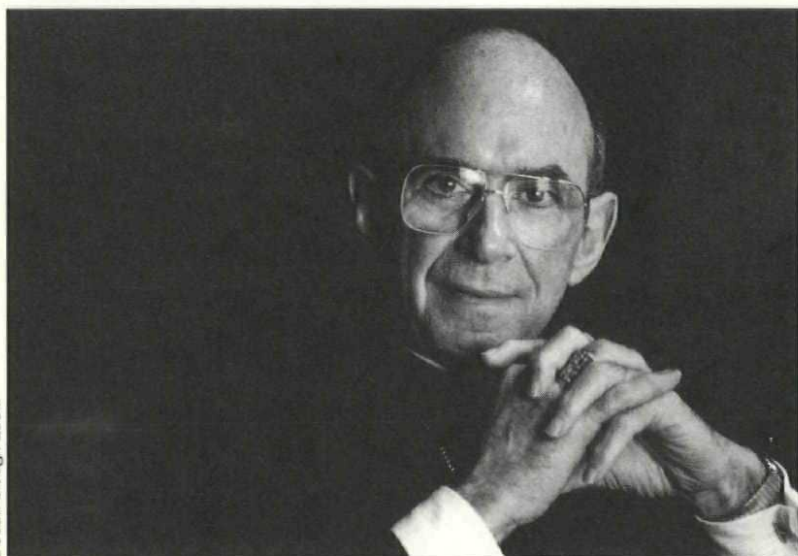
world from which we all came, but, as Card. Bernardin recognized, the hierarchical phase of Catholic life in America has yielded to a collegial Church, in which the application of our faith to our lives and professions does not depend on or wait for a bishop's permission. As glorious as, in many ways, it was, the Catholic culture that thrived in embattled separation from the mainstream American culture no longer exists. Catholics, and Catholic healthcare givers, are now integrated in the general culture. Our challenge is to secure our identity, once fortified in communities as thick with Catholic households as Mount Carmel with Catholic headstones, in a secular universe in which powerful forces threaten to distort and nullify the influence of the most basic Catholic ideals and beliefs.

As we consider what Card. Bernardin's life means for Catholics in general, and for Catholic healthcare in particular, his life reveals how, as Catholics and professionals, we participate in the mystery of Incarnation. He understood that we might take pride in our own community, but that by birth into our faith we are obligated to take on the flesh of the larger one around us. We express our faith by engaging the urgent issues of contemporary healthcare, especially the issue of its transformation from works of mercy into stocks chatted up on "Wall Street Week in Review."

The Church, as Card. Bernardin saw it, depends on its organization in order to manifest itself as a mystery. If we are to learn from him, we must commit ourselves to the structured Church rather than the kind of freeform Catholicism that some people, frustrated by a seemingly lagging institution, now advocate. The voice of the Catholic tradition cannot successfully speak on the monetization of healthcare from a postinstitutional diaspora; it must come from one Church, from Catholics collegially integrated into that Church, which explains and supports their work in the world.

In a demonstration of how Catholics can apply

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Card. Joseph Bernardin, 1928-1996

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BROTHER JOSEPH

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their convictions to questions the world would rather hold separate, Card. Bernardin brought the Church's voice to bear on one of the most urgent conflicts of the century, the debate on the use of nuclear arms. This examination of a major secular issue in light of the Catholic tradition pricked the Church's own conscience as it arrested the attention not only of America but of a world still chilled by the Cold War.

So, too, when he introduced the *Consistent Ethic of Life* (Sheed & Ward, Kansas City, MO, 1988, pp. 1-11), Card. Bernardin took on the nation's gridlocked debate on abortion, broadening the context of issues that must be addressed by anyone claiming to be prolife. A month before he died, he stood before an eager audience at Georgetown University to explore the relevance of Christian teachings to national social policies.

Card. Bernardin often seemed to enter the arena alone, the one ecclesiastic credible and clear-eyed enough to speak out on the issues of the world in which Catholics live. Yet he offered us a model by always speaking as a representative of the institutional Church, ever associating himself with the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, the teachings of the pope, and the traditions of the Catholic faith.

More than any other churchman or public figure, Card. Bernardin articulated the critical issues facing Catholic healthcare. Catholic physicians, nurses, and other healthcare professionals find themselves in a world whose faith lies in free markets and investment returns

rather than in professional service to the sick—service that, like any work of the Spirit, cannot be measured by an economic yardstick. Card. Bernardin challenged us: Shall we be a business, which will ultimately destroy us, or shall we enter the epic battle, for it is no less than that, for the preservation of the deepest human and Christian values in serving the sick?

In one last entrance into the incarnational mystery, Card. Bernardin took on the flesh of a patient, entering the world of surgery, treatment, and night terrors as fully as Jesus took on our flesh and spared himself none of our experience, save sin, to understand, embrace, and hallow our condition. His pastoral involvement with other cancer patients extended finally to 600 for whom he prayed and with whom he maintained personal contact. Card. Bernardin's body, racked with pain in the last year and a half of his life, rests in a cemetery that mirrors an earlier Catholic epoch. But his spirit is with everyone who knows that the present world is sinful and yet loves it.

His life—so gentle, so patient, so brave and untiring in leading the Church's dialogue with the modern world—tells us that the great issues for Catholics have little to do with highly publicized intramural topics, such as celibacy and the ordination of women, whose importance pales in comparison with the daunting questions of healthcare. The world of healthcare reflects the community in which we live and in which and to which we must apply our faith. Card. Bernardin's spirit bids us to strive to serve and to save it. □