

# What the Catholic Social Tradition Brings To Healthcare Reform

## Catholic Social Teaching Serves an Important Countercultural Function But Also Has Some Weaknesses



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Lisa Sowle Cahill, PhD

*For a complete text of Dr. Cahill's speech, see p. 18.*

In the struggle to ensure healthcare for the uninsured, Catholic social teaching lends strength to the mission in a number of ways, most notably by serving a prophetic, countercultural function, said **Lisa Sowle Cahill, PhD**, professor of theology at Boston College. "Catholic healthcare brings to the table, even in a 'public' conversation, the many voiceless and too often faceless victims of the status quo, whom it is easy to exclude and even forget because, on their own, they do not have the power to get through the door."

On the other hand, she said, the Catholic social tradition also has some weaknesses in relation to healthcare, including:

- ▶ The tendency "to advance broad ideals while downplaying the fact that realizing them in practice may involve conflict and compromise"

- ▶ An inclination to approach social justice and change in a hierarchical manner, rather than adopting a grassroots orientation in which advocacy for the rights of the disadvantaged is led by the disadvantaged themselves

- ▶ A decidedly Western European bias that can prevent us "from authentically hearing and appropriating the faith experiences, moral values, and social needs of persons in other cultures." For example, the call for "universal access," while admirable, obscures the fact that, because of America's history of slavery and its continuing racism, black people and white people often have different healthcare needs.

While laudatory of CHA's efforts, Cahill cautioned that the achievement of accessible and affordable healthcare "goes against the grain of American individualism and of the market, and that Americans may be far from prepared to accept this vision, even as an ideal." She also warned that reform efforts will require "negotiation and cutbacks, reallocation of funds, and curtailment of benefits that some have come to expect or already take for granted."

# Justice Can Flourish through Politics

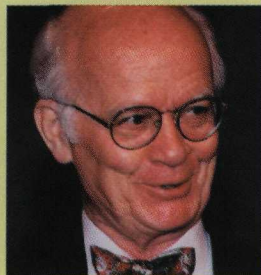
## A Theologian Outlines Six Steps the Ministry Must Take in Its Search for Justice

As CHA embarks on its goal to build a national consensus on the need for healthcare for all, we must not forget the link between spiritual life and politics—not political parties, but *polis*, the "human city," asserted

**Rev. Martin E. Marty, PhD**, director of the Public Religion Project at the University of Chicago. The search for justice is a daily venture as well as a long-term plan, he said. "One does not wait three years, find a magical spiritual and prophetic consensus, and then start putting it into action. One 'lets justice flourish' in personal, Catholic, institutional, and national life, now

and constantly, while working to build consensus.”

Citing Psalm 72 as the source for the assembly theme, Marty pointed out that the psalm was originally to a king. Since we no longer live under a monarchy, “for whom in our prayer and our prophecy are we asking



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Rev. Martin E. Marty, PhD

ing that justice be effected, so that it flourishes?” For the answer, he said, “Look around you. Sixty-one percent of our citizens are outside the range of healthcare, and even those who are covered may not have just coverage.”

Marty outlined six steps in the search for justice that will enable it to flourish through us as a nation. “First you must discern—see—the situation of the needy and oppressed.” After discernment, “Prepare the soil,” Marty urged. Before we build consensus, we acknowledge God as the source of justice and humans as his stewards. We recognize, in Pope John Paul II’s words, “*digitatis humanae*,” and that healthcare is essential to the realization of human

dignity and justice. We must also see that the search demands dialogue with others—conversation, not argument. Then we are ready to plant the seeds of justice.

The vital role religion plays in society then cultivates an environment in which justice is allowed to flourish. “Religion brings to political and policy discourse not only reason, but elements that religion nourishes as people make decisions: intuition, memory, community, tradition, hope, and affection [in the sense of an ‘affective’ life together] as part of its role in society.” But we must also counter that which inhibits the flourishing of justice: the idea that religion plays a marginal role in America’s secular society, or that Americans’ spirituality is too individualistic for them to work for the common good and justice. It is incorrect to call ourselves a strictly secular society, Marty said. “We are a religio-secular society. We are seeking” spirituality. We may be individualistic, but “our web of affiliations is strong, and building community is absolutely essential if justice is to flourish.”

Finally, we must nurture justice as it flourishes, by looking for renewal in its sources; through criticism, including self-criticism; through witness and gesture; and through immediate action along the way.

Politics, the work of the “human city,” works through many elements to let justice flourish, Marty concluded. It works through the individual; through the institutional voice of the Church; through agencies of the Church, such as CHA; through society, in consensus building; and through the rest of life. But politics has its limits, too: the eternal, and that which transcends even justice.

## Strategies for Healthy Systems

### Cosponsorship Ensures Ministry’s Future

**Mutuality, Not Proportionality, Underlies Cosponsorship Effort between Daughters of Charity and Sisters of St. Joseph**

Many of the recent healthcare mergers, affiliations, and other collaborations have been driven by concerns about the continued viability of a particular facility. Not so with the cosponsorship agreement reached by the four provinces of the Daughters of Charity and the Sisters of St. Joseph.

In describing the arrangement, **Sr. Janet Fleishacker, SSJ**, president of the Sisters of St. Joseph, Nazareth, MI, explained that “this partnership only makes sense in the context of the broader perspective about the continuation of the mission and ministry into the future.”

This is particularly true for the Daughters of Charity National Health System (DCNHS), St. Louis, which will be entering this cosponsorship arrangement with the much smaller Sisters of St. Joseph Health System, Nazareth, MI. **Sr. Xavier Ballance, DC**, DCNHS board chair and a sponsor representative from the East Central province, explained that some people in the sys-