

# Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Canon Law

BY ED GIGANTI

**S**r. Patricia Smith, OSF, PhD, is a college professor, a canon lawyer, and the adjunct judge in the tribunal of the Diocese of Wilmington, DE. Occasionally, she finds herself consulting with Catholic health care executives and sponsors about the intricacies of church law presented in the 1,700-plus canons of the Code of Canon Law. "It's an area where a lot of leaders feel insecure. I try to help them understand that they already know more than they think they do. Then I try to teach them where and how to get help when they need it."

That is what Sr. Smith will be doing in April when she joins several of her colleagues to serve as faculty for CHA's 2003 Canon Law Forum. This year's program is an introduction to canon law specifically designed for ministry leaders: CEOs, vice presidents, chief medical officers, mission executives, directors of governance, board chairs, trustees, and leaders of sponsoring congregations.

The curriculum for this two-day workshop was developed by CHA's Canon Law Committee. Rev. Kevin D. O'Rourke, OP, JCD, STM, professor of bioethics at Chicago's Stritch School of Medicine, is chairperson of the committee. He said that health care leaders' knowledge of canon law is especially important for maintaining the Catholic identity of their organizations. "After centuries of experience, the church has set up a method for achieving its goals, and that method is expressed in canon law," Fr. O'Rourke said. "If persons making decisions are not aware of the qualities and characteristics that must be exhibited by the health care organization as a 'moral person' in the church, there can be a great deal of confusion or possibly even evil."

"Understanding of canon law is important because we minister in the name of the church, continuing the ministry of Jesus," Sr. Smith said. "Canon law provides the values or norms from which we can effectively operate in mission."

The program will prepare health care leaders to



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make critical decisions affecting the identity, mission, and administration of ministry organizations. It is intended to increase leaders' effectiveness by building their knowledge of:

- Juridic persons
- Administration and alienation of church property
- Evolving forms of sponsorship
- The role of the diocesan bishop
- Canonical responsibilities of leaders

Joining Sr. Smith and Fr. O'Rourke on the program faculty will be noted canonists Rev. Francis Morrissey, OMI, JCD, professor of canon law, St. Paul University, Ottawa, Ontario; and Sr. Peggy Ann Martin, OP, JCL, senior vice president, sponsorship and governance at Catholic Health Initiatives, Denver. CHA President and Chief Executive Officer Rev. Michael D. Place, STD, and Sr. Patricia A. Talone, RSM, PhD, vice president of mission services, will round out the faculty, along with an executive leader from a ministry organization who will provide a "real-world" perspective on applications of canon law.

Sr. Smith has often been asked how CEOs and others might increase their board members' knowledge of canon law. "I have told them that one way would be to lead a five-to-10-minute discussion about a canon law topic at every board meeting," she said. "CEOs can do this. I say to them, 'You don't have to be an absolute expert, but you have to have some grasp of it and communicate it to others.'" "As we look to the future, lay people, lay boards will, more and more, form the moral persons, the 'juridic persons' who perform the actions within the Christian community," Fr. O'Rourke said. "And that's good." □

*CHA's 2003 Canon Law Forum, "Introduction to Canon Law for Health Ministry Leaders," will be held Thursday and Friday, April 24-25, 2003, at the Hilton LaJolla Torrey Pines, LaJolla, CA. A welcoming reception will be held Wednesday evening, April 23. For registration information, check CHA's website, [www.chausa.org](http://www.chausa.org), or contact Joanne Elden Beale, [jbeale@chausa.org](mailto:jbeale@chausa.org).*

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