

# CATHOLIC HEALTH CARE AND THE JUBILEE OF MERCY

**W**hen Pope Francis announced the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy in March 2015, I must confess I placed that piece of information on the back burner. The beginning of the jubilee was several months away, and details were forthcoming. I knew it would be a special time for reflection and renewal, but at the time I was not thinking of the jubilee's broader implications for the Catholic health ministry.



**BRIAN SMITH**

Since then, Pope Francis has used multiple opportunities to invite not only the Catholic faithful, but the whole world, into the mystery of divine mercy. In September 2015, the Vatican published the Pope's letter outlining the jubilee indulgence. In it, I found the usual prescription of conditions necessary for obtaining a jubilee indulgence: sacramental confession, reception of Holy Communion, profession of faith, recitation of a prayer and walking through a designated Holy Year door. But I found so much more.

Pope Francis has extended an invitation for all people to experience God's mercy, wherever they are in life. The Pope invites the sick, elderly, homebound, incarcerated, women who have had an abortion and others to experience the mercy of God in their current condition, even though their current state may impede their freedom. For example, to the imprisoned, Pope Francis writes: "May the gesture of directing your thoughts and prayers to the Father each time you cross the threshold of your cell signify for you passage through the Holy Door, because the mercy of God is able to transform hearts, and is also able to transform bars into an experience of freedom."<sup>1</sup> God's mercy is available to everyone.

Pope Francis also invites us during this jubilee year to discover the dual aspect of mercy. Mercy does not stop once I have been forgiven and reconciled with God. Mercy also is my response to God's redeeming love, expressed by how I treat my neighbor. Recall the parable of the unforgiving debtor who had a huge debt forgiven by his master but then went out and had a fellow servant

imprisoned for not paying back a small debt (Matthew 18: 21-35). Divine mercy invites us to extend to others the same mercy we have received. In fact, the motto for the jubilee year is: "Merciful like the Father."

To bring home what our practice of mercy should look like in concrete terms, Pope Francis invites the "Church in this Jubilee Year to rediscover the richness encompassed by the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. The experience of mercy, indeed, becomes visible in the witness of concrete signs as Jesus himself taught us."<sup>2</sup> In *Misericordiae Vultus*, the theological document that lays out the purpose of the jubilee year, Pope Francis is even more direct. "The Church's very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love."<sup>3</sup>

So what does this jubilee year of mercy have to do with Catholic health care? We are that credible witness to merciful and compassionate love. Most of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy are lived out every day in our facilities. But how do we learn to slow down and ponder the connection between our daily work, the gift of God's mercy and our response to that gift? How do we help staff see they are living the Gospel when they feed patients and residents; help a paralyzed person drink; offer dignity, shelter and fresh clothing to a homeless patient; visit a patient or resident as a person and not simply as a patient in a bed needing hourly vitals; grieve with and help families bury their loved ones; instruct people lost in the chaos of our health care system; counsel the chronically ill who are doubtful; comfort the poor and underserved as they wonder how they will pay their bills; and pray for all of these people we are serving?

If we are living the Gospel, then we are evangelizing — literally bringing good news to a world

that is searching and hungering for meaning and love. Our evangelization is not done through proselytizing or catechesis. The message we offer is through our actions of mercy and love, which in turn may lead people to ask: “What or who inspires those who work in Catholic health care to act in such a selfless, countercultural way?”

During his address at the 2015 Catholic Health Assembly, Archbishop Blase Cupich of Chicago spoke of how the mission of Catholic health care “evangelizes by attraction.” Quoting paragraph 15 in Pope Francis’ *Evangelii Gaudium*, Archbishop Cupich said, “We cannot forget that evangelization is first and foremost about preaching the Gospel

to those who do not know Jesus Christ or who have always rejected him. Many of these are quietly seeking God, led by a yearning to see his face, even in countries of ancient Christian tradition. All of them have a right to receive the Gospel. Christians have the duty to proclaim the Gospel without excluding anyone. Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, they should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet. It is not by proselytizing that the church grows, but ‘by attraction.’”<sup>4</sup>

The Archbishop went on to say, “That last sentence is important to the point I want to make here. I am not suggesting that the mission of Catholic health care is to take up the work of evangelizing and catechesis, but rather to highlight that what you are presently doing in caring for the sick gives people hope, awakens in them the beauty of life, disposes them to the call of God. In this way you are partners with those involved in parishes and communities who take up the work of catechesis and evangelization. Your work disposes people to God, and the entire Church can benefit from your good example of how to treat people who are searching in life for answers.”<sup>5</sup>

All ministries within the church are evangeli-

cal. Catholic health care’s “evangelization through attraction” has the opportunity to transform staff, patients, families and communities. Our spiritual and corporal works of mercy flow from God, the Fountain of Mercy. We love and show compassion to others because we have been the recipi-

ents of divine mercy and are compelled to share that same joy and freedom. In this dual aspect of mercy, gift and response, we reveal to others the tenderness and love of God.

This jubilee year of mercy is a wonderful opportunity to reflect on how our day-to-day work in Catholic health care connects with the spiritual and corporal works of mercy and God’s love. We can cre-

ate environments where our staff, patients, residents and communities continue the incarnation of God’s healing mercy in the world. If we are able to do this, then our facilities will also become holy year doors where people will experience and indulge in divine mercy.

**BRIAN SMITH, MS, MA, MDiv**, is senior director, mission integration and leadership formation, the Catholic Health Association, St. Louis.

### Corporal Works of Mercy

*Feed the hungry. ■ Give drink to the thirsty.  
Clothe the naked. ■ Shelter the homeless.  
Visit the sick. ■ Visit the imprisoned.  
Bury the dead.*

### Spiritual Works of Mercy

*Counsel the doubtful. ■ Instruct the ignorant.  
Admonish sinners. ■ Comfort the afflicted.  
Forgive offenses. ■ Bear wrongs patiently.  
Pray for the living and the dead.*

#### NOTES

1. Francis, “Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis According To which an Indulgence Is Granted to the Faithful on the Occasion of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy,” Sept. 1, 2015.
2. Francis, “Letter.”
3. Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus* paragraph 10, April 11, 2015.
4. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, paragraph 15. Note that the text attributes the phrase “by attraction” to a May 13, 2007, homily by Pope Benedict XVI.
5. Blase Cupich, “Mission Driven: Linking the Past to a New Ecclesial Moment,” Bishop Joseph Sullivan Lecture, Catholic Health Assembly, Washington, D. C., June 8, 2015.

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

[www.chausa.org](http://www.chausa.org)

# HEALTH PROGRESS®

---

Reprinted from *Health Progress*, March - April 2016  
Copyright © 2016 by The Catholic Health Association of the United States

---