

*Philanthropy*

# THE INTERSECTION OF VALUES AND LOVE

The word philanthropy comes from the Greek *philanthropos*, which means a love of humanity. The broader understanding of philanthropy recognizes anything that helps people to become more human is an exercise of love. This is consistent with Catholic theology's understanding of the Incarnation and how our participation with grace is "sacramental."



**BRIAN SMITH**

The doctrine of the Incarnation says God loved us so much that God chose to become human so humanity might be lifted up to become divine. St. Athanasius, in his work *On the Incarnation*, summarized this act of self-giving: "God became man that man might become God." When we are caring, nourishing, developing and enhancing our own humanity or the humanity of others, we are helping people become what God intends — more divine.

It is easy to see why the church's ministries of education, health care and social services, are considered sacramental. By reverencing the dignity of every person and helping people develop more fully as humans, we are participating in the act of divinization — making God's love more present in humanity. Put another way, we are cooperating with God's grace. Actions to help people become more human are acts of love — manifestations of God's grace.

## INVITATION TO THE MINISTRY

This foundational understanding of God's self-giving love and God's desire to raise up human dignity is the bedrock of Catholic health care's mission and vision. Sharing our mission and vision is central when we invite others to participate in the ministry. It is our mission and vision that shape the culture people should feel when they walk through the doors of our health care facilities. It is, we hope, why our associates come and choose to stay and work with us. It is why we turn no one away from our doors and why we offer the same compassionate care to all patients and

residents, regardless of their race, gender, socioeconomic background, country of origin, sexual identification or religion. It also is the foundation upon which a Catholic ministry builds its philanthropic endeavors.

Before we ask potential benefactors to serve on a charity committee or make a donation, do we clearly communicate our mission and vision? As Henri Nouwen points out in *A Spirituality of Fundraising*: "When we seek to raise funds, we are not saying, 'Please could you help us out because lately it's been hard.' Rather, we are declaring, 'We have a vision that is amazing and exciting. We are inviting you to invest yourself through the resources that God has given you — your energy, your prayers and your money — in this work God has called us to do.'"<sup>1</sup>

New-hire orientation is similar. We try to help associates connect their gifts and talents to the Catholic health care mission, thereby finding a higher meaning in their work and being part of a ministry rooted in God's love. The same opportunity for formation exists with our volunteers and donors. Foundations should work with their mission leaders to include an orientation on mission, values, heritage and Catholic social tradition for all volunteers and foundation boards. The mission leader can help volunteers and donors see that giving of themselves through time or money is ministry. But just as staff orientation should not be the last time associates reflect on the mission, vision and values, the formation process of volunteers and benefactors should not end after their initial contact with the organization.

To believe that our donors' participation in our organization's mission is ministry is to help them deepen their sense of how God is working through them and to allow them to see they are

fellow missionaries. If we are asking donors only to give something — volunteer hours, work on a fundraising event or money towards a building drive — we are not seeing them as co-ministers. We are using them to accomplish our earthly goals. We are not welcoming them into the ministry of building the Kingdom of God.

### FORMATION FOR BENEFACTORS

What does ongoing formation for donors look like? Can we help them learn to listen to how God is calling them to deeper conversion? Can we help them grow, develop and flourish as individuals?

I have found days of reflection and renewal for groups of volunteers, foundation boards and other benefactors are life-giving for all involved. When we invest the time and resources on a day for volunteers and benefactors, surrounded by beauty and the opportunity for quiet reflection, it has a tremendous impact on them. Donors begin to see the spiritual dimension of their giving. They realize they are called to be stewards of the gifts God has entrusted to them in a way that serves others. It helps them connect their actions to the organization's mission and values, which are rooted in Scripture and church tradition. They soon see they are participating in a ministry, and their volunteerism or contribution is helping to enhance the human dignity of others. Many never have considered their giving as participating in God's grace — yet that is exactly what it is.

As we form this spiritual connection with our donors, we begin to build trust and meaningful relationships with them, and we will start to learn about their worries and needs. Perhaps the widow feels lonely, or the elderly couple who have volunteered for years in the gift shop no longer are able to drive.

Philanthropy is never a one-sided type of giving. We are ministering with them and to them, and they to us, for we are both givers and receivers of God's grace. It is our responsibility to make sure that we are interested in the well-being, the human flourishing and the divinization of our benefactors.

As these relationships develop, volunteers and foundation boards become faith communities. The hospital or skilled nursing facility where they volunteer becomes a second home. They grow close to staff, patients and residents, all of whom

have become their neighbors. Forging friendships with each other means volunteers may socialize and get to know each other's families.

In one ministry where I served, there was a foundation board member diagnosed with breast cancer. A fellow board member, herself a survivor of breast cancer, called and offered to drive and stay with her during chemotherapy treatments. The two had met on the foundation board, but I believe a spiritual relationship developed between them because they saw their work as ministry and

**Philanthropy is never a one-sided type of giving. We are ministering with them and to them, and they to us, for we are both givers and receivers of God's grace.**

as participating in God's grace. Answering the call to ministry, coupled with formation, always leads to community and an abundance of grace.

I hope as we reflect on the importance of philanthropy in Catholic health care, we never view donors as means to our strategic ends. Instead, we should see them as co-ministers sharing in the exciting and important work of God's healing ministry. Because they are responding to a call, we are responsible for their formation. This means helping them learn how God is calling them to use their gifts and talents in service of the community so that others become more fully human.

In the process, they, in turn, will grow and flourish and experience God's grace in their own life. Together, we will recognize that our collaborative efforts to meet the health and social needs of our neighbors makes us all brothers and sisters. We will form true community, and in so doing, we will manifest God's love and build the Kingdom of God. Isn't this approach to philanthropy more exciting and enduring than a one-time ask?

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

### NOTE

1. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Fundraising* (Nashville, Tennessee: Upper Room Books, 2010), 16.

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 2017  
Copyright © 2017 by The Catholic Health Association of the United States

---