

THE WORLD'S GREATEST DISEASE: ARE WE AT RISK?

What is the world's most serious, implacable illness? Diabetes? Zika? HIV? It may not be what you think. Pope Francis told us the answer during a gathering in Assisi, Italy, of religious leaders from around the world to celebrate the 2016 World Day of Prayer for Peace. He called on believers of all faiths to confront what he pronounced the greatest sickness of our time: indifference.



BRIAN SMITH

"It is a virus that paralyzes, rendering us lethargic and insensitive," he said, "a disease that eats away at the very heart of religious fervor, giving rise to a new and deeply sad paganism: the paganism of indifference."

Francis used the humanitarian crisis of millions of refugees fleeing their countries due to war, persecution and famine to illustrate his point. He mentioned how he has personally traveled to the refugee camps on the Greek island of Lesbos and witnessed how people are held in camps with deplorable conditions, separated from their families, friends and faith communities. Refugees and migrants are looked upon with suspicion and kept at a distance behind fences and walls while politicians try to figure out what to do with them.

The Holy Father reminded us that these are our brothers and sisters and that we have an obligation to assist them: "I am thinking of the lives that have been shattered; of the children who have known only violence in their lives; of the elderly, forced to leave their homeland. All of them have a great thirst for peace. We do not want these tragedies to be forgotten. Rather together we want to give voice to all those who suffer, to all those who have no voice and are not heard."

The Pope's comments have challenged me at a personal level. Do I have the disease of indifference? Am I doing as much as I possibly can to assist my brothers and sisters who are refugees and migrants? Am I doing enough for the poor and marginalized who already live in my city? Oh, I ease my conscience by making donations to Catholic Relief Services and other charitable organizations. I pray for those who are suffering from war, poverty and other conditions that

marginalize them. But is that really enough?

Pope Francis says prayer is not enough. Combatting indifference requires concrete actions of cooperation. In Assisi, he stated, "Prayer and the desire to work together are directed towards a true peace that is not illusory; not the calm of one who avoids difficulties and turns away, if his personal interests are not at risk; it is not the cynicism of one who washes his hands of any problem that is not his; it is not the virtual approach of one who judges everything and everyone using a computer keyboard, without opening his eyes to the needs of his brothers and sisters and dirtying his hands for those in need. Our paths lead us to immersing ourselves in situations and giving first place to those who suffer; to taking on conflicts and healing them from within; to following the ways of goodness with consistency, rejecting shortcuts offered by evil; to patiently engaging processes of peace, in good will and with God's help."

We cannot solve the needs of refugees, migrants and the poor and marginalized by sitting at our computer screens or watching from our couches. We have to get our hands dirty, enter into the discomfort and pain of our brothers and sisters and make sacrifices. Am I willing to do this?

As my professional career has advanced, I have noticed that with each promotion, I move further away from the patient — the person who is at the

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center of our care. My ministry has evolved from caring for patients, families and frontline staff to ministering to the leaders who work with frontline staff. I spend most of my time not in a health care facility, but in an office, conference room or hotel meeting space.

I have to be intentional about looking for the poor and vulnerable and responding to their needs in a way that is meaningful for them. It is an ongoing challenge as I try to balance work, life, family commitments and the call to serve my neighbor. I am not perfect and know the Lord is calling me to make greater sacrifices.

In our ministries, we may want to ask ourselves this question: “Is our ministry at risk of suffering the disease of indifference?” The knee-jerk reaction will be, “Of course not! One of our core values is to care for the poor and marginalized. We spend millions of dollars on uncompensated care. We have programs for those who are poor and underserved.”

But, are we doing enough? Are we getting our hands dirty? Are we entering into the suffering and pain of the most vulnerable? Are our systems making decisions that show a preferential option for the poor, or is our charity care comfortable and safe? These are not easy questions to ask, but if we are serious about living into our mission and core values, they need to be part of our ongoing corporate examination of conscience.

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and ministry aspect of why we do what we do. The increased demands on quality and patient satisfaction while reimbursement structures continue to change; the challenge of recruiting, developing and retaining staff who are passionate about working in a faith-based health setting usually are enough to keep one busy. The endless emails and meetings that could take up the entire

day if we let them.

“When do I have time to roll up my sleeves, get my hands dirty and spend time with the poor, suffering and marginalized?” any of us may wonder.

The answer is: Find the time. As leaders in health care, we can become isolated from the patient if we are not intentional about finding time to get out of our offices and conference rooms and onto the floors. We can forget that it is the front-

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line staff who are the ones actually encountering the poor, suffering and marginalized on a daily basis. Do we make it a point to talk with our patients and residents? Do we get to know them, hear their stories and see them as our brothers and sisters, not as a statistic? Do we engage with our staff, get to know them, watch for signs of burnout and recognize that some of them may be the truly vulnerable among us?

I have come to realize that looking for those on the margins does not require that I travel a great distance. They are all around me — if I pay attention. Lazarus is sitting at our door, lying in our beds, entering our emergency departments and mopping our floors. That is why Pope Francis’ message is so poignant. Indifference to the needs of others has become an epidemic in our world. We need to ask ourselves, and our organizations, how we are going to prevent and/or cure it.

On Nov. 1, 2016, the Solemnity of All Saints’ Day, at a Mass in Malmo, Sweden, Pope Francis offered an antidote for the disease of indifference. Preaching on the Gospel of the day, Matthew 5:1-12, the Beatitudes, the Pope reminded the crowd that All Saints’ Day is an occasion to rededicate ourselves to the baptismal call to holiness.

“Holiness,” according to Pope Francis, “is a love that remains faithful to the point of self-renunciation and complete devotion to others.” He continued, “We are called to be blessed, to be followers of Jesus, to confront the troubles and anxieties of our age with the spirit and love of Jesus.

Thus we ought to be able to recognize and respond to new situations with fresh spiritual energy.”

Francis then offered six new beatitudes that illustrate what holiness looks like in today’s world:

■ Blessed are those who remain faithful while enduring evils inflicted on them by others and forgive them from their heart

■ Blessed are those who look into the eyes of the abandoned and marginalized and show them their closeness

■ Blessed are those who see God in every person and strive to make others

also discover him

■ Blessed are those who protect and care for our common home

■ Blessed are those who renounce their own comfort in order to help others

■ Blessed are those who pray and work for full communion between Christians

“All these are messengers of God’s mercy and tenderness,” said the Holy Father, “and surely they will receive from him their merited reward.”

His words tell us that the vaccine for indifference is forgiveness, mercy,

presence, sacrificing for the good of others and our Earth, and working towards unity. All of these are actions that call us out of ourselves and into community. These beatitudes show we are paying attention to the Lazaruses all around us, and we are not absorbed by the pagans of self-indulgence. This is Kingdom work and reveals the love of the Father and Jesus.

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Homily Aids

The Catholic Health Association is pleased to offer a collection of homilies to help connect the healing mission of the Church with parishes and the communities we serve.

Written by prominent Catholic theologians and preachers, the homilies bring important issues about healing and care for the poor in the context of Gospel and Church teachings.

UPCOMING HOMILIES

The homilies will be posted two weeks prior to these scheduled Sundays:

JANUARY 29, 2017

4th Sunday Ordinary Time

Mt 5:1; 12a

The Beatitudes

FEBRUARY 5, 2017

5th Sunday Ordinary Time

Mt 5:13-16

“You are the Light of the World”

For more information

Contact Brian Smith, CHA senior director, mission integration and leadership formation, at bsmith@chausa.org or (314) 253-3503.



Visit www.chausa.org/homilies for these homily aids.

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