

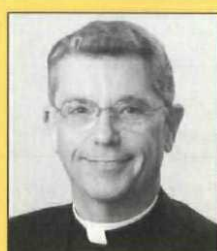
A Shared History of “Doing What Needs to Be Done”

BY FR. MICHAEL D. PLACE, STD

I had originally decided to forgo my column in this issue of *Health Progress* because Fr. J. Bryan Hehir, president of Catholic Charities USA, and I had each been asked to contribute an article to the special section celebrating both the 275th anniversary of the founding of our two ministries and our historic joint meeting this August in Chicago.

What changed my mind? This past February the Catholic Health Association held its invitational theological colloquium in New Orleans. This meeting provided an ideal opportunity to learn more about the Ursuline Sisters of New Orleans, whom we consider to be the founders of our two ministries 275 years ago. In fact, it turned out that I was to be in New Orleans shortly after the 275th anniversary of the sisters leaving Rouen, France, for America in February 1727. Fortunately, I was able to set aside a morning for this “continuing education.” What follows are some reflections on my experiences.

While in New Orleans, it was my privilege to celebrate the Eucharist at the National Shrine of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, located at the current site of the Ursuline Academy. It turned out that my “congregation” was a sophomore religion class. Although I had come to pray in thanksgiving for the rich history of our two ministries, I was dramatically reminded of how—for 275 years—the ministries of education, social services, and health care have shared common origins and ecclesial space. In fact, one could surmise that the Ursuline Sisters did not plan on pursuing three distinct ministries, but rather saw themselves simply doing “what needed to be done.” The forces of history brought about today’s sharp demarcation between the ministries. How fitting then, that as we celebrate this significant milestone, we also are pursuing the realization of the collaborative



Fr. Place is president and chief executive officer, Catholic Health Association, St. Louis.

vision outlined in *Ministering Together*.¹ This vision proposes new opportunities for the parish, educational, social service, and health care ministries together to do “what needs to be done” within the family of faith and for the human family.

My second stop was at the Old Ursuline Convent, where the sisters lived and served from 1824 to 1912. In fact, it was their third “home.” After they first landed in August of 1727, the Ursuline Sisters spent their first seven years in temporary quarters at Kolly House at Bienville and Chartres streets. Their first convent was built on land granted them by royal charter through the Company of the Indies, a tract bounded by present-day Royal, Ursulines, Barracks, and Decatur streets. The Ursuline Sisters lived in this first convent from 1734 to 1752, when a second convent was built on this same site. They occupied the second convent, which was located on Chartres Street, from 1752 to 1824. As I walked the halls of the convent (now a museum maintained by the archdiocese), I was deeply aware of something the “now generation” can so easily lose—a sense of history. The “old” convent is considered the oldest building in the Mississippi Valley. The history associated with this convent and its two predecessors is, in a sense, a snapshot of what was to be repeated over and over again by other courageous religious men and women:

“The Ursulines came to New Orleans in response to a call from Governor Bienville, who recognized that education was of vital importance if the fledgling colony were to grow and prosper, and who knew the esteem the Ursulines enjoyed in Europe for their work, dedication, and determination. This occurred only nine years after Bienville and his men had cleared the site for fortifications on the muddy banks of the Mississippi River.

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NEW COVENANT IN PRACTICE

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A structural challenge to the initiative is that while many Catholic institutions are diocesan-based, Catholic health systems are often regional or national in size. When the Diocese of Lansing started its *New Covenant* initiative, it was a collaborative effort between the diocese, Genesys Health System, and Saint Joseph Mercy Health System. Genesys has since merged to create Ascension Health, and Saint Joseph Mercy has merged to create Trinity Health. The dynamics of collaboration have changed significantly because we no longer have health systems located primarily in the Diocese of Lansing.

And not insignificant, a challenge for the initiative's one-person department has been the sheer size of the diocese; I just can't be everywhere at once.

THE FUTURE

Future plans for the *New Covenant* initiative include maintaining and expanding the collaborative relationships that have been developed. Maintenance focuses on several issues: strengthening existing relationships with parishes, health care, social services, and education; encouraging continued regional and diocesan gatherings; and supporting lay involvement. Expansion involves concentrating on developing collaborative relationships with all Catholic service providers. *New Covenant* will attempt to increase collaboration by building on smaller parish-focused activities. These activities can lay the groundwork for building a positive relationship. The initiative will work to focus regional initiatives on issues that demonstrate the benefits of collaboration and will also attempt to expand collaboration by continuing to reach out ecumenically. □

REFLECTIONS

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Our shared history provides the inspiration and wisdom we will need if we are to address successfully the challenges that face us in the new century.

"Under the auspices of King Louis XV, 12 courageous women, in the spirit of St. Angela, answered Governor Bienville. On a cold, foggy morning in February 1727, in Rouen, France, they boarded the ship *La Gironde*, which was bound for the New World and New Orleans. They had no idea what might be awaiting them, but simply and humbly stepped into that vast void with faith and a sense of mission. On a hot and steamy day in August of 1727, with not even so much as a wooden sidewalk in the New Orleans colony to welcome them, the Sisters landed and went immediately to work.

"The strenuous voyage of the Ursulines from France lasted five months, during which they were plagued by terrible storms, threats by pirates, and seasickness. What food was not lost was meagerly rationed. The Ursulines met the challenge that few would have braved, and scarcely any have accomplished.

"When the Ursuline nuns arrived in New Orleans in 1727, Governor Bienville was no longer in charge and had returned to France. There were extraordinary squabbles among residents of the colony that were both political and ecclesiastical in nature. Through all of this, with characteristic Ursuline calm and faith, the nuns, under the direction of their prioress Mother St. Augustin, continued their own spiritual development and their educational efforts with boarders, day students, orphans that they had taken

in from both the city and as a result of the Natchez massacre, and with the African and Native American girls of the colony.

"The Ursulines thereby not only established the first school for girls, but also ran the first free school and the first orphanage, held the first classes for African slave and Native American girls, and organized the first retreat for ladies within the present limits of the United States. They also performed outstanding work in the military hospital in the new colony, where one of the Ursulines, Sister Francis Xavier, became the first woman pharmacist in the New World. Most important of all, by their Christian living, they so influenced the wives and mothers in the colony that this Christian spirit endures today."²

Clearly, the story of these heroic followers of St. Angela Merici is one we forget at our own peril. Their history and that of so many others provide the inspiration and wisdom we will need if we are to address successfully the challenges that face us in this new century. □

NOTES

1. *Ministering Together: A Shared Vision for Caring and Healing Ministries*, National Coalition on Catholic Health Care Ministry, Silver Spring, MD, 2000.
2. See the history of the Ursulines at www.ursulineneworleans.org/history.htm.