

# The Parable of the Dance

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**B**y the time this issue of *Health Progress* appears, we will be close to the June 10 start of our annual Catholic Health Assembly, which is being held this year in Atlanta. This assembly's theme is "Keeping the Faith: Energizing the Culture of Catholic Health Ministry"—an increasingly important topic as the ministry seeks to be faithful to its Gospel call even as it adapts in response to both external and internal challenges.

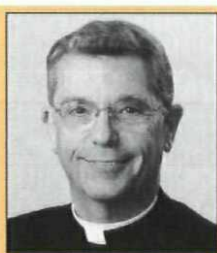
I am writing this column in mid-February, however, as I fly home after some vacation time in Mexico. I am writing now while I still can vividly recall an incident—and the reflections inspired by it—that occurred while I was in Mexico. These reflections relate, I think, to the assembly's topic.

It might be helpful for the reader, in order to appreciate the story I am about to tell, to first "get in touch" with the child who remains present within each of us: in touch with the innocence, the simplicity, the joyfulness, and playfulness that characterize the second and third years of life (forgetting for the moment the fact that parents often describe this same period as the "terrible twos").

## A MOTHER AND CHILD

My story takes place in a restaurant full of local people and tourists. It was evening. As often is the case in vacation areas in Mexico, a group of local musicians had come to the cafe to entertain the diners. After the band had played for a while, a young Mexican mother got up from the table where she had been sitting with her husband and two young children. Taking the hand of one of the children, a small boy, she moved to a chair nearer the musicians. She sat down, pulling the boy into her lap.

At first, the little boy was clearly unhappy with this development. He huddled close to his mother, clutching at her arms. Over his shoulder, he eyed the band and its instruments with an almost fearful look. In fact, he soon put his hands over his ears, beseeching his mother to return with him to the rest of the family.



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But the mother did not go back. Instead she began, oh so slowly, to sway in her chair in rhythm with the music. As she did this, she held her son close with one hand and, with the other, stroked his head. Ever so gently she pulled him closer, so that her movement became his movement. Meanwhile, whispering in his ear, she pointed out the various instruments in the band, naming them for him.

In time the boy sat up, gesturing at the musicians and talking to his mother about them, while together they continued swaying to the music. When the song ended, both mother and son had smiles on their faces. The band then took a brief break. The boy glanced back at his father and sibling, as if to tell them, "I think I'll stay here awhile."

When the band resumed, it played at a decidedly faster tempo. The mother's hands now beat gently on the boy's shoulders, keeping time to the music. By the time the last song of the set was being played, both son and mother were on their feet. His little body was moving without coaching in somewhat awkward but seemingly effortless harmony with what was a traditional Mexican piece of music. At the song's close, he and his mother applauded the musicians.

At that point, the band's leader stepped forward and applauded the boy. He understood that the boy was, that night, being introduced by his mother to a centuries-old custom of Mexican folk dance. The bandleader took the boy's hand and, signaling the band to start playing, began to show him some rudimentary dance steps. The boy imitated him. His movements were primitive, to say the least. But when the music was done and the youngster ran back to his mother (who had since been joined by his father and sibling), he had on his face a look like that one might see on the face of an Olympic gold medallist. It seemed that, deep within, he knew now that he was part of a living reality much greater than his family, or this band, or this restaurant.

As I walked the beach later that night, the memory of that little incident refused to leave me. It



was clear to me that I had witnessed something quite special: the deliberate introduction to, and initial passing on of, a piece of Mexican culture. Though I was too tired that night to follow this train of thought much further, I was struck by the notion that the incident might serve as a parable that could help us reflect on our own efforts to both deepen and “pass on” a vibrant Catholic health care culture.

### THE PARABLE OF THE DANCE

The incident I was privileged to witness was not a text-book event. It was not about ideas per se, but rather about a way of life, a particular “take” or perspective on reality. The incident was one frozen frame in the midst of millions of others. It was in itself something *dynamic*, not static. It was a moment that barely existed in itself, being defined as much by the past as by a future yet to be. It seemed to have been as

much *second nature* to the young mother as it was to the band and its leader. If I had asked them to talk about what was, for me, an “event,” they very likely would have shrugged their shoulders and given a quizzical look: What *event*? The incident I witnessed was nothing unusual for them—it was just everyday life.

But ordinary as it was, it had certain defining characteristics. The mother took the *initiative*. She *deliberately stepped away* from the ordinary after-dinner prattle of a young family to take her son to a *place he had not been*. He was brought, to speak poetically, to another birth canal, one that would carry him into a world of history and tradition beyond that of the immediate family.

Unlike the solitary journey we make at birth to this life, or the later one to the life eternal, the journey to be taken by this young boy began in a *loving embrace*. He was drawn inside to a safe place where he could *feel* what his mother felt *as she felt it*. In that safe, rhythmic place *words were spoken*, the instruments were *named*, the moment *described*. The description was not the goal, however. What the boy’s mother hoped he would find was safety enough to allow him to sit up and move on his own, *without support*. Her music had to become *his* music.

But more was involved than music. In encouraging the boy to applaud the musicians, the mother began to show him that what felt so good was a *gift* given by the musicians who happened

to be present that night—but given also by the millions of Mexicans who had moved, sung, and played for hundreds of years previously. Similarly, the musicians who handed on the gift that night got to experience the unique joy of watching another person begin to *hold precious* the gift they were giving, even as it had been given to them.

It was in the midst of that exuberance that the child began to move beyond the embrace of his family into that of the larger world. In showing the boy some dance steps, the bandleader invited him to move from celebrating a rhythm within to *becoming an artist himself*. Those first steps were, of course, rudimentary; they would be overshadowed and forgotten as the boy’s dancing became more skilled and complex. In taking the time that night to be a teacher—a *mentor*—the bandleader also began passing on what is

perhaps the most important lesson of all: *When the day comes that you are a grown, successful man yourself, never let yourself become too busy to stop what you are doing and mentor another person—to share with that person the same beauty I shared tonight with you: an encounter with something greater than time and space.*

Might we not find in this story and the italicized words of my commentary some of the elementary steps followed when a culture—any culture—is passed on? I believe that the religious who founded this ministry followed essentially these steps, and followed them just as unthinkingly as did the young mother. The question we face is: How is that being done today?

Who is the young mother who will take those who are new to Catholic health care away from everyday prattle to a new place where, feeling safe, they can experience and learn the music that is the culture of this ministry? Who are the musicians who will play the music and applaud the movement of the novices on the dance floor? Who will teach the first steps of an apparently simple dance that, in time, will be absorbed, forgotten, and transcended in the complexity of an artist’s grace?

And, most important, how will everyone involved come to hear, feel, and sense the One who is the source of the music that is the God-given mission of Catholic health care? How do we come to dance in unison with the One who truly is *Lord of the Dance*? □



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