

# Serving God's People

## Catholic Health Care Must Continue the Tradition of Jesus' Ministry of Healing and Caring

Some people would argue that the church has no business sticking its nose into the "real world" of politics, business or science. The business of church, they might argue, is spirituality.

Yet, look at the actions of Jesus. He was not afraid to become involved in what Father Ron Rolheiser, OMI, might call the "muck and grace" of everyday life. From turning water into wine during the wedding feast in Cana, to weeping at the death of his friend, Lazarus, to entrusting the care of his mother to the Apostle John, Jesus continually demonstrates that our core mission as Christians, as faithful disciples, is rooted very much in the daily realities of our lives. And nowhere is this found so consistently, than in Jesus' loving care and concern for those who are sick in soul, yes, but also sick in body.

Examine the profound impact of Jesus' ministry of healing and caring. Time after time, he demonstrated his sensitivity to those who were sick in body and in mind. He healed so many, both face-to-face and from afar, as in the story of his encounter with the Roman centurion. If his actions were not enough, remember his parable of the Good Samaritan, a man who demonstrates his faith, who lives his faith, by caring for the medical needs of a stranger, in crisis.

Jesus does not just tell us what to do; he shows us how to act. And so throughout its history, the church in every age, in every land, has demonstrated a continuation of the Savior's healing ministry. In more developed societies, such as the United States, the Catholic health care system has developed into a remarkable witness and example of the church living out the mission of Jesus. Where society has fallen short, the church has stepped forward to minister to the physical needs of all, especially those most easily neglected by the rest of the world. In developing countries, the Catholic Church continues to focus on the establishment of health care where often there

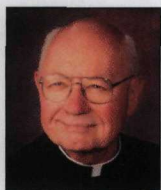
has been very little or none before.

It is not an exaggeration to characterize health care in this country as a crisis. The situation is almost impossibly complex. Complicating factors include increased costs, new technology, competition and lack of health insurance. Those pressures have an impact on health care at every level in our country, including for-profit health care, including Catholic health care. The situation is in flux. The changes continue unabated. Successful health care reform remains a distant goal. The U.S. health care system is not healthy.

And that is exactly where we belong. Catholic health care is vital, and it is alive. It is at the forefront of helping those most in need of help, who are least able to help themselves. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we have grown and we have changed with the times. We have built upon the good traditions of the past to ensure a viable future. It has not always been easy. The results have not always been perfect. Yet, we remain committed to our mission and to living the Gospel mandate of loving without ceasing, of loving everyone, and of acting on that love. With the compassion that we hope reflects the compassion of Our Savior himself, we remain committed to justice, to peace, and committed to respect for every human person, made in the image and likeness of God.

God's word, the constantly developing teaching, the magisterium of the church, the explosion of knowledge and technology: all of these make for constantly unfolding frontiers, inviting us to venture where we have never gone before. As I reflect on the tumult of our times, the rapid changes, our need to adapt to forces beyond our control, I cannot help but reflect on the story of Jesus and the apostles, in the boat, tossed about by the storm. What did Jesus expect of his disciples during that storm? And what does he expect of us?

Health care ministry is part of the ministry of the church, part of its mission. With tremendous complexities, competing values, ethical dilemmas,



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and changing corporate structures, the need exists to be grounded in an identity that gives solid footing and direction for the future. Just recently, Pope Benedict XVI issued two important encyclicals: *Deus Caritas Est* ("God Is Love") and *Spe Salvi* ("Saved by Hope"). Both documents have tremendous messages for everyone involved in the mission of Catholic health care. God's love is for all. There are no exceptions. The parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us of the need to take the initiative for all those who have been abandoned, left behind alongside life's road. And there are far too many who fit into that category of "left behind." As St. Paul reminds us, the love of God *impels us*. The church must give living witness to that command. Our commitment to Catholic health care is one such living witness.

In his encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict is emphatic about the integration of love into the mission of the church: "The Church's deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God . . . celebrating the sacraments . . . and exercising the ministry of charity . . . for the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being" (#25). The "soul" of the church has to be deeply grounded in the love of Jesus. That includes Catholic health care. Pope Benedict reaffirms that loving and serving the poor, the sick, the aged in the name of the Lord, consistent with Catholic moral teaching, is not *beside* the point; *it is the point*.

Pope Benedict's encyclical on hope also reminds us of the need always to be people of hope, a church of hope — and of course, a Catholic health care system of hope. The church is sometimes imagined as a boat. I like that image. For example, it could be well and truly said that we are riding out the storm of the sexual abuse crisis. But the Holy Spirit remains with us. We will survive, and we will be stronger and better than before. Catholic health care also is being tossed about by waves of uncertainty, of complexity, and a lack of national resolve. This is not a time to fold our tents and leave. On the contrary, we engage in the mission of health care with the greatest courage, wisdom, care and

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advocacy we can muster. Those attitudes demand from us hope, not because we can see great success coming, but because we know that is what God wants us to do. The term "pilgrim people," from the Second Vatican Council, means exactly that: we are pilgrims. We are on a journey. We have not yet arrived at our final destination. That reality should also remind us in Catholic health care that we are on a pilgrim journey. We have not given up. But we are far from finished.

We take comfort and strength from the fact that we do this ministry together. St. Paul's analogy of the body is appropriate. He reminds us that no part of the body can say that it doesn't need the other parts. That's how closely bonded together we are in the church with her mission. The church cannot say to Catholic health care, "I don't need you." Nor can Catholic health care reject the larger church.

The church and Catholic health care go together. We need one another. The church is not fully Catholic without the mission of healing the sick, curing the lame, bringing sight to the blind. Catholic health care is a powerful example of practicing what we preach about the dignity of the human person, about healing and caring, about serving those left along the side of the road.

On the other hand, Catholic health care needs the church to remind itself of the focus on Jesus' ministry, the imperative to love, and the dignity of the human person. Corporate structure is in service to mission.

Together, we strive to serve all of God's people, bringing the loving care and healing of our Savior to a hurting world. ■



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