

# SOCIAL JUSTICE

## AND CATHOLIC HEALTH CARE

*Six days before Passover Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. They gave a dinner for him there, and Martha served, while Lazarus was one of those reclining at table with him. Mary took a liter of costly perfumed oil made from genuine aromatic nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and dried them with her hair; the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil. Then Judas the Iscariot, one [of] his disciples, and the one who would betray him, said, "Why was this oil not sold for three hundred days' wages and given to the poor?" He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief and held the money bag and used to steal the contributions. So Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Let her keep this for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."*

The 91st Catholic Health Assembly earlier this summer called our attention to John 12:8 and, by allusion, to the context that results in Jesus speaking that sentence. In these eight verses, the Gospel of John delineates a contrast between Jesus, the healer; Judas, the false servant; and Mary, the true servant.

Jesus the healer is underscored at the very start of the passage with the reminder of the resurrection of Lazarus. Raising from the dead is the ultimate act of healing.

Then Mary's homage to Jesus is described: She anoints his feet with aromatic nard and then dries his feet with her hair. With this act of humility, which serves to recognize the sacredness of Jesus, Mary suffuses her hair with the fragrance of the nard, the sweetness of which fills the entire house for all the company there to enjoy. What Mary does for Jesus rebounds upon her and the others present.

Then Judas, whom the Gospel notes as "the one who would betray [Jesus]," tries to belittle and condemn Mary's act of hospitality and emblem of worship and service by talking about how much money for the poor the precious ointment could have brought. The Gospel immediately makes clear that the future betrayer is a present liar and thief who has none of the compassion for the poor he trumpets. This hit-me-over-the-head-with-a-hammer clarification makes perfectly clear Jesus' final rebuke to Judas.

That rebuke has two parts: Jesus telling Judas to lay off Mary and making allusion to his own death; and Jesus calling out Judas on his hypocrisy.

When Jesus says, "Let her keep this for the day of my burial," he asserts a right for Mary, a lowly unmarried woman living in her brother's home; he is emphasizing the dignity of the individual, of this particular woman Mary.

The final remark from Jesus, then addressed to Judas—"You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me"—rebukes Judas for his hypocrisy (talk without truth) and for his theft (the truth, as it were, of talk without truth). Jesus is also rebuking the cover story Judas uses for his criminal enterprise. Judas preaches charity for the poor; Jesus acts in solidarity with the poor, as he is with Mary here. That solidarity is the basis for true service and healing.

This issue's installment of our series on social justice teaching and Catholic health care is Mark Koenig's "Thirsting for Solidarity: The Elimination of Poverty Begins in Knowing the Poor as Our Brothers and Sisters." Koenig uses personal experience and the moral growth it engenders to renew this message of the importance of solidarity and to arrive at a call for action on the part of the Catholic health ministry.

As the special section in this issue of *Health Progress* demonstrates, the ministry is already doing much to unite with others to solve global problems. But can we do it in a ministry-wide and consistent manner? Experts have calculated, notes Koenig, that if each of the industrialized countries would contribute 0.7 percent of its GDP to address the problem, extreme poverty could be eradicated. Can the Catholic health ministry improve on that suggestion by contributing, say, a full one percent of our budgets for solidarity efforts that will make a real difference in the lives of poverty-stricken people across the globe?

The poor, indeed, are always with us, and the Catholic health ministry is called to serve them in the healing tradition of Jesus—in solidarity.

—DAVID WARREN, PhD