

Take Chances for the Vulnerable, Poet Urges

Catholic Healthcare's Rich Tradition Has Prepared It to Be the Voice of 44 Million Uninsured Americans

CHA members should "take chances" in offering care to the vulnerable, poet-philosopher **John O'Donohue, PhD**, told an assembly general session. The government's failure to provide healthcare coverage for 44 million Americans has left "an enormous empty space" in society, he argued. "CHA's rich tradition should enable it to become the voice of those millions,

to do things that other organizations can't even begin to imagine."

Jesus recognized the vulnerable as the "true priests and priestesses" of the kingdom he wanted to inaugurate, said O'Donohue, the author of several books of poetry and inspirational writing, including *Anam Cara*, a bestseller in his native Ireland. Illness, he said, is among other things "a call" to become a member of that kingdom. It is because Jesus devoted most of his time and energy to ministering to the suffering that the Catholic health ministry puts the patient at the center of its work, O'Donohue said.

Unfortunately, the market has come to dominate healthcare, O'Donohue told the audience.

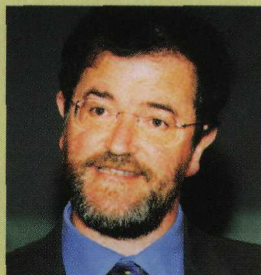
Because market economics always attempts to "reduce creation to commodity," it is incompatible with true care of the ill and the injured. "But because it does this, the market is generating its own opposition—a great spiritual hunger." He urged those involved in Catholic healthcare to become aware of that hunger and learn to address it.

O'Donohue said market economics is symptomatic of "postmodern culture," which values functionalism and utility rather than imagination, individuality, mercy, and justice. "Our society worships those who achieve things," he argued. "Whereas caring is the soul and spirit of justice, postmodern culture tends to be indifferent. There seems to be something closed off—wounded or disappointed—at the heart of that indifference."

Caring is the cure for indifference, O'Donohue said. "Kindness, as Jesus demonstrated, is one of the most powerful forces in the world." But kindness requires the ability to imaginatively enter another person's world. "Imagination is the great servant of justice," said O'Donohue. "Imagination is committed to wholeness; it doesn't like one-sidedness."

But only individuals are capable of imagination, he argued. "Each human being has a duty to become an individual. If you renege on that duty, something within you becomes sad and dies." Healthcare systems, like all other postmodern institutions, are dead until their leaders learn to encourage individuality in staff members.

"Jesus, who was a frontier person always journeying toward the divine, understood better than anyone else the importance of the individual imagination," said O'Donohue. Because they are devoted to Jesus' mission, the leaders of Catholic healthcare must encourage imagination as he did.



"Each human being has a duty to become an individual. If you renege on that duty, something within you becomes sad and dies."

John O'Donohue, PhD