

WE HOLD A TREASURE

As I finish my time as CHA's president and now 54 years in health care, in positions ranging from nurse aide, staff nurse, nursing supervisor, vice president for nursing, hospital president, board chair and CHA president and chief executive officer, I am more convinced than ever that we in Catholic health care hold a treasure.



SR. CAROL
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Over the centuries, we have been the visible sign of God's love for the sick, for welcoming new life to our world and for accompanying the dying in their journey back to God. Our ministry gives credibility to the church's claim to be following her Lord's admonition to care for the sick and vulnerable.

Over those same centuries, there have been vast changes in our clinical care and delivery systems. What has not changed is why we do what we do.

We have defied conventional wisdom in age after age. At our best, we have sought out the sickest, most challenging and most vulnerable in every community. We have formed tens of thousands of health care workers from the most highly skilled professionals to the essential rank and file staff. We have formed them not only in the skills needed to do their jobs, but in an understanding and appreciation of the dignity of those they serve and the greatness of their calling.

In every age, there have been the naysayers, those who say the glory days are behind us, today's environment makes us obsolete. Pope Francis has an incredible response to this: "The memory of this long history of service to the sick is cause for rejoicing on the part of the Christian community, and especially those presently engaged in this ministry. Yet we must look to the past above all to let it enrich us. We should learn the lesson it teaches us about the self-sacrificing generosity of many founders of institutes in the service of the infirmed, the creativity, prompted by charity, of many initiatives undertaken over the centuries, and the commitment to scientific research as a means of offering innovative and reliable treatments to the sick. This legacy of the past helps us to build a better future, for example, by shielding Catholic hospitals from a business mentality that is seeking worldwide to turn health care into a profit-making enterprise which ends up discarding the poor." (Pope Francis, Message for World Day of the Sick, 2018)

Our challenge today is whether we are so convinced of the treasure we hold and its importance

that we believe with Pope Francis that "this legacy of the past helps us to build a better future."

Health care is very difficult today, but it has always been difficult. We have some eternal issues and some unique issues to deal with. At times it can seem overwhelming.

We also have some eternal opportunities and unique opportunities. We are part of a historic transformation, moving the church's health ministry from a centuries' old structure embedded in single religious communities to structures built by combining those ministries and entrusting the responsibility for them to lay people who have been prepared and welcome the opportunity to live their baptismal calling more fully. We also recognize that we are doing it at a time of significant turmoil in the health care industry.

It is imperative that we appreciate the splendor of what is happening every day in our facilities if we are going to be energized and creative enough to take Catholic health care to the next milestone. Only knowing how much authentic Catholic health ministry means to so many today in our facilities gives our minds and hearts that essential insight.

The late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin wrote as he was dying of pancreatic cancer a beautiful pastoral letter on health care. He was not only being treated in a Catholic facility but was talking with so many others being treated there as well. He talked about what a grace that was. He also raised concern about how in today's world we could lose our way. After affirming what a treasure our ministry is, he said "it would be a tragedy if we did not have the courage to move beyond the past and have the creativity to address the future."

I know and believe in the people of Catholic health care. We can take our critical ministry to new heights. We also can help change the current perception of our church in the face of the abuse crisis and advance the quality and availability of health care for millions. What greater opportunity could God possibly have given us?

Sister Carol Keehan

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