

What the Catholic Social Tradition Brings To Healthcare Reform

Catholic Social Teaching Serves an Important Countercultural Function But Also Has Some Weaknesses



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Lisa Sowle Cahill, PhD

For a complete text of Dr. Cahill’s speech, see p. 18.

In the struggle to ensure healthcare for the uninsured, Catholic social teaching lends strength to the mission in a number of ways, most notably by serving a prophetic, countercultural function, said **Lisa Sowle Cahill, PhD**, professor of theology at Boston College. “Catholic healthcare brings to the table, even in a ‘public’ conversation, the many voiceless and too often faceless victims of the status quo, whom it is easy to exclude and even forget because, on their own, they do not have the power to get through the door.”

On the other hand, she said, the Catholic social tradition also has some weaknesses in relation to healthcare, including:

- ▶ The tendency “to advance broad ideals while downplaying the fact that realizing them in practice may involve conflict and compromise”

- ▶ An inclination to approach social justice and change in a hierarchical manner, rather than adopting a grassroots orientation in which advocacy for the rights of the disadvantaged is led by the disadvantaged themselves

- ▶ A decidedly Western European bias that can prevent us “from authentically hearing and appropriating the faith experiences, moral values, and social needs of persons in other cultures.” For example, the call for “universal access,” while admirable, obscures the fact that, because of America’s history of slavery and its continuing racism, black people and white people often have different healthcare needs.

While laudatory of CHA’s efforts, Cahill cautioned that the achievement of accessible and affordable healthcare “goes against the grain of American individualism and of the market, and that Americans may be far from prepared to accept this vision, even as an ideal.” She also warned that reform efforts will require “negotiation and cutbacks, reallocation of funds, and curtailment of benefits that some have come to expect or already take for granted.”

Justice Can Flourish through Politics

A Theologian Outlines Six Steps the Ministry Must Take in Its Search for Justice

As CHA embarks on its goal to build a national consensus on the need for healthcare for all, we must not forget the link between spiritual life and politics—not political parties, but *polis*, the “human city,” asserted

Rev. Martin E. Marty, PhD, director of the Public Religion Project at the University of Chicago. The search for justice is a daily venture as well as a long-term plan, he said. “One does not wait three years, find a magical spiritual and prophetic consensus, and then start putting it into action. One ‘lets justice flourish’ in personal, Catholic, institutional, and national life, now