



✚ Ecclesiology & Spiritual Renewal
Program for Health Care Leaders

REFLECTIONS ON

THE PAPAL BASILICA OF
ST. MARY MAJOR

THE PAPAL ARCHBASILICA
OF ST. JOHN LATERAN

THE HOLY STAIRS
(SCALA SANCTA)



Papal Basilica of St. Mary Major

Introduction

The Papal Basilica of St. Mary Major stands as one of Rome's most ancient and beloved churches, a living witness to the mystery of the Incarnation, God choosing to dwell among us in vulnerability and love.

This Basilica might be familiar, as Pope Francis was entombed here in 2025, near the altar of Saint Francis.

As pilgrims enter this sacred space, they are invited not only to contemplate history, art, and devotion, but also to reflect on their call to serve the common good: the social conditions that allow all people to flourish in dignity.

For those who serve in Catholic health care, this Basilica holds particular resonance.

The healing ministry of the Church is rooted in the same mystery proclaimed here, God's nearness to human suffering, fragility, and hope, and is expressed through a commitment to the common good, especially among those most vulnerable.

This guide weaves together the story of St. Mary Major with reflective invitations that speak directly to the vocation of healing, accompaniment, and shared responsibility for the well-being of all.

Historical Foundations

According to tradition, the Papal Basilica of St. Mary Major was founded following a miraculous snowfall on the Esquiline Hill in August of 358.

Guided by this sign, Pope Liberius traced the outline of the Church and dedicated it to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Over centuries, the Basilica has remained a Marian anchor for the Church in Rome, a place of prayer, refuge, and proclamation of God's fidelity for the sake of the whole people of God.

Marian Presence & the Ministry of Compassion

Mary's fiat, her free and conscious "yes," was an act of radical availability.

It was an openness to God that welcomed risk, uncertainty, and profound responsibility not only for herself, but for the world God so loves.

In Catholic health care, this same availability is lived each day in the presence offered to patients, families, and communities, especially in moments of fear, suffering, and transition.

Reflection

Mary consented to carry Christ into a broken world.

Where are you being asked to carry Christ today, in difficult conversations, moments of discernment, or moments when healing is uncertain?

How does your daily work contribute both to individual healing and to the common good of your community?

Scripture for Prayer

Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. Luke 1:38

Architectural and Liturgical Prominence

The Papal Basilica of St. Mary Major is renowned for its layered architecture and luminous mosaics.

These works depict scenes from salvation history that unfold for the sake of the whole human family. In the central hall, above the columns, are 5th-century mosaics depicting Old Testament stories. The mosaics on the arch framing the sanctuary depict moments in Jesus' life.

The Basilica's long nave draws the pilgrim forward, inviting contemplation and encounter.

Its liturgical life continues to nourish a communal faith that binds individuals into one body.

The Crib and the Bedside

Among the Basilica's most treasured relics are those associated with the Holy Crib.

They are preserved in the *Oratorium Praesepe* (Chapel of the Manger) located directly under the Papal High Altar.

These fragments recall that Jesus' first earthly dwelling was a place of simplicity, exposure, and care.

For those in health care, the patient's bed becomes a modern manger, a holy ground where Christ is encountered in fragility.

Here, reverence for one life also serves the flourishing of the whole community.

Reflection

As you contemplate the Holy Crib, consider the parallels between the crib and the hospital room.

How do you recognize Christ in those who are dependent, nonverbal, anxious, or near death?

How does honoring the dignity of each person strengthen the common good of families and communities?

Scripture for Prayer

And the King will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.'

Matthew 25:40

Treasures and Devotional Icons

St. Mary Major houses some of the Church's most revered Marian images.

Foremost among them is the icon of *Salus Populi Romani*, Mary, protector of the Roman people.

This icon is located in the Pauline Chapel (to the left of the main altar). The icon has been carried in procession during times of plague, war, and unrest.

It embodies the Church's belief that care for the sick, the poor, and the fearful is essential to the well-being of society as a whole.

Salus Populi Romani, the Common Good, and the Healing Mission

The title *Salus Populi Romani* proclaims Mary as guardian of the people's well-being.

Catholic health care inherits this communal responsibility—care not only for individual patients, but for entire communities.

This responsibility is expressed by advancing conditions that support health, equity, access, and hope, especially for those most at risk.

Reflection

Who are “the people” entrusted to your care, those without access, those burdened by poverty, inequity, or moral distress?

How does your work shape systems, policies, and practices that serve the common good while remaining attentive to each person’s dignity?

Scripture for Prayer

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son.”

Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his home. John 19:26–27

Catholic Health Care as Marian Ministry for the Common Good

Mary does not draw attention to herself. She points to Christ, whose life and ministry were always ordered toward the healing of persons and the renewal of the community.

Similarly, Catholic health care exists not for its own success, but for the flourishing of human life and the strengthening of the common good entrusted to it.

In times of moral complexity, workforce fatigue, and systemic strain, Mary stands as both model and companion—calling caregivers and leaders to perseverance, solidarity, and hope.

Final Reflection

How does your role— clinical, administrative, pastoral, sponsor, or governance— advance both personal healing and the common good?

Where are you being invited to advocate, collaborate, or lead in ways that promote justice, access, and shared responsibility for health?

As you leave St. Mary Major, carry with you the witness of Mary, who holds human suffering with tenderness and intercedes for the well-being of all.

May your service in Catholic health care be a sign of Christ's healing presence and a concrete expression of the common good.

Sending Prayer

Mary, Mother of the Church and Mother of Mercy, accompany all who serve in Catholic health care.

*Help us to recognize Christ in every person entrusted to our care and to build communities of healing that promote dignity, justice, and hope for all.
Amen.*

Archbasilica of St. John Lateran

Introduction

The Archbasilica of St. John Lateran is not only an ancient monument, but a living sign of what the Church herself is called to be: the home of the Eucharist, the place where Christ is confessed, and the “mother and head of all Churches of the city and the world.”

As the cathedral of the Bishop of Rome, it makes visible the Church’s deepest identity—founded on Christ, ordered toward communion, and existing for the sake of the common good.

The Church as a Spiritual Building: You Are a Living Stone

Pope Leo XIV connects the stones of the basilica with the living Church—you are meant to be a “living stone” as part of God’s temple.

The faithful themselves are the living stones of God’s spiritual house, each with a distinct role in building up the Body of Christ.

This vision emphasizes shared vocation rather than hierarchy alone. The Church is continually “under construction,” shaped by many gifts, vocations, and forms of service, all ordered toward unity and mission.

Catholic health care depends on the contributions of many leaders, caregivers, chaplains, sponsors, and governance.

No single role builds the ministry alone.

Reflection

What “stone” are you within this living structure—caregiver, leader, teacher, learner, advocate?

How does your work contribute to the health not just of individuals, but of the entire community you serve?

Scripture for Prayer

Come to him, a living stone, rejected by human beings but chosen and precious in the sight of God, and, like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 2:4–5*

The Bishop’s Chair of Rome: Authority as Service to Communion

The cathedra, the bishop’s chair located directly behind the high altar, makes St. John Lateran the true cathedral of the Pope.

It is not a throne of personal power, but a sign of teaching authority exercised for unity, faithfulness, and care of the whole Body of Christ. Authority here is inseparable from responsibility.

The chair signifies leadership that listens, discerns, and guides toward communion rather than control.

Leadership in Catholic health care similarly carries moral weight. Decisions shape not only outcomes, but culture, trust, transparency, and the credibility of the mission.

Reflection

How does your exercise of authority foster unity and mutual responsibility?

Where are you called to lead in ways that strengthen trust and serve the common good rather than narrow interests?

Scripture for Prayer

Whoever wishes to be first among you must be your servant. Matthew 20:27

The Twelve Colossal Statues of the Apostles: Shared Vocation and Collective Responsibility

Lining the nave are the towering statues of the twelve Apostles, each distinct yet united in purpose.

Their scale reminds pilgrims that the Church stands on human witnesses—imperfect, diverse, and entrusted with carrying the Gospel into the world.

No single Apostle bears the mission alone.

Apostolicity is inherently communal.

Catholic health care is sustained by many vocations—clinical, administrative, pastoral, technical, and strategic.

The common good depends on honoring these interdependent roles.

Reflection

How do you recognize and strengthen the diverse gifts within your organization?

Where might collaboration across roles more fully express shared responsibility for healing and justice?

Scripture for Prayer

As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. 1 Corinthians 12:12

The Apse Mosaic: Christ the Source of Life for the World

The apse mosaic, located behind the high altar, depicts Christ at the center.

Life flows outward through the cross, the Tree of Life, into the world.

It visualizes the Church's mission: to remain rooted in Christ so that healing, hope, and renewal reach beyond the sanctuary.

The image insists that communion with Christ always has social consequences.

When Catholic health care remains grounded in Christ, its impact extends beyond individual encounters.

It shapes communities, policies, and futures.

Reflection

Where do you see the fruits of your ministry flowing outward—into neighborhoods, systems, and public life?

How might deeper grounding in mission strengthen your organization's contribution to the common good?

Scripture for Prayer

I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.

John 10:10

Final Reflection

At St. John Lateran, pilgrims are invited to recognize the Church as a living temple—founded on Christ, built by many, and ordered toward communion and the common good.

May this reflection deepen your understanding of Catholic health care as an ecclesial ministry of healing, unity, and hope.

Sending Prayer

Jesus Christ, make us living stones in your healing work.

Strengthen all who serve in Catholic health care.

May our worship be sincere, our leadership humble, and our service ordered toward dignity, justice, and the flourishing of all. Amen.

The Holy Stairs (Scala Sancta)

The Holy Stairs are traditionally believed to be the staircase from the praetorium of Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem, which Jesus Christ ascended during His Passion on the way to trial.

Tradition holds that the stairs were brought to Rome in the 4th century by Saint Helena, who brought many relics from the Holy Land.

Pilgrims ascend these 28 white marble steps on their knees, remembering Christ's suffering and offering prayer in humility.

At the top of the Holy Stairs is *Sancta Sanctorum* Chapel. The chapel houses numerous relics historically reserved for papal devotion.

Two other stairways to the Sancta Sanctorum display frescoes featuring scenes from the Old Testament.

The Holy Stairs invite a step-by-step contemplation of Christ's journey toward suffering, compassion, and surrender.

In the Catholic health care ministry, this becomes a lens for how we accompany patients, families, and colleagues—especially where pain, uncertainty, moral distress, and fatigue live.

Entering in Reverence

As you approach the Holy Stairs, take a moment to quiet your heart.

What burdens, sins, or struggles are you carrying with you today?

Ask for the grace to walk this reflection slowly and honestly.

Reflection

Christ chose the path of humility and obedience.

Where am I being invited to let go of pride or self-sufficiency?

Step by Step with Christ

Each step represents Christ's willing movement toward the Cross.

The Holy Stairs remind us that love often looks like slow, deliberate movement, not efficiency or control.

Consider how Jesus continued forward despite fear, injustice, and pain.

Notice any resistance within yourself to moving forward in faith.

Prayer

Give me the courage to follow my call, even when the way is hard.

Repentance and Mercy

Pilgrims ascend the stairs in repentance.

Where do I need mercy?

Who might I need to forgive, including myself?

Reflection

Christ's suffering is not meant to burden us with guilt, but to free us through love.

Trust and Surrender

At the top of the stairs, pause in silent prayer.

What part of my life do I need to surrender more fully to God?

How can I trust that God's love is greater than my fear?

Prayer

Into your hands, I place my patients, my team, my family, and my own spirit. Hold what I cannot hold.

Sending Thought

The Holy Stairs remind us that holiness is often found in small, faithful steps taken with love.

May this reflection strengthen our trust in Jesus, who walks with us in every ascent and every descent of life.