1-1-2012

Health Care: Costs, Ethics & the Law

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Recommended Citation
"I was sick and you visited me," Jesus said in the parable of the last judgment, thus identifying himself with the sick and suffering.\footnote{Matthew 25:36.} Jesus' compassion and preferential love for the sick is evident in the Gospels, particularly in the numerous healings that he performed. This ministry of Jesus has continued in the Church for the past 2,000 years. In fact, the Church has received the mission of healing from Jesus himself who, in sending the disciples to preach the Kingdom, also instructed them to heal the sick.\footnote{Matthew 10:7-8.}

The healing ministry of Christ the physician embraced the whole person. He came "to heal the whole man, soul and body."\footnote{Catechism of the Catholic Church § 11503 (2d ed. 1997) [hereinafter Catechism].} In fact, he did not heal all the physically ill: "His healings were signs of the coming of the Kingdom of God. They announced a more radical healing: the victory over sin and death through his Passover."\footnote{Id. § 1505.} Similarly, the Church's mission is ordered to the healing of the whole person and is not limited to bodily health. The Church continues the healing ministry of the One who was the physician of souls and bodies.

Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan provides a paradigm for the Church's ministry of healing. Both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI have used this parable to illustrate the concern we must have for the sick and suffering. Pope Benedict XVI has said: "At the end of the parable, Jesus said: 'Go and do likewise.' With these words he is also addressing us. Jesus exhorts us to bend over the physical and mental wounds of so many of our...
brothers and sisters whom we meet on the highways of the world.\(^5\)

Inspired by the example of Jesus and his charge to his disciples, the Church through the centuries has had a special solicitude for the sick, manifest not only in prayers of intercession and the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, but also in the provision of health care through institutional care. Throughout the history of the Church, health care ministry has been one of the most vital and significant apostolates of the Catholic Church in society. This has continued to the present day. Today, Catholic institutions administer approximately fifteen percent of the health care in the United States.\(^6\)

The complexities of health care today have been a challenge for our society as well as for Catholic health care. The Church has advocated for universal access to health care. This advocacy is a consequence of our commitment to the life and dignity of every human person as well as to other principles of the Church's social doctrine: the common good, the universal destination of goods, and solidarity. In the face of economic challenges in health care, we continue to maintain that economics cannot be the determinant factor when it comes to care for those who are sick and suffering. The Church's love and concern for the poor, "part of her constant tradition,"\(^7\) has been manifest throughout history in Catholic health care ministry. Creativity and commitment are needed so that the "preferential option for the poor" continues to be a distinctive feature of Catholic health care today.

In contemporary health care, structural changes have often become necessary to ensure better quality of care, wise use of resources, and sometimes even survival of health care institutions. There have been new partnerships created within Catholic health care that have proven immensely beneficial. Yet partnerships that have extended beyond Catholic health care to non-Catholic entities sometimes present serious challenges. Much care must be taken so that the Catholic mission and identity are not lost or compromised in such arrangements. This is especially important in the area of Catholic moral teaching.

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7. Catechism, supra note 3, ¶ 2444.
Even if it means going against the tide of public opinion, Catholic health care, to be true to its identity, must uphold and witness at all times to the sacredness of human life from conception to natural death. In our society today, threats to the sanctity of life continue to grow, especially at life's beginning and end. There are serious moral issues, for example, in care for the seriously ill and dying. Just as direct abortion is never a morally acceptable option, neither is suicide or euthanasia.

To guard and serve life is at the very heart of Catholic health care. To compromise on this mission would be to abandon the very reason for the existence of Catholic health care. Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical Evangelium Vitae, stated that the profession of Catholic health care workers "calls for them to be guardians and servants of human life." Catholic health care, in its deepest identity, is a service to life and love, especially toward the weak and vulnerable.

The testimony of Catholic health care to the Gospel of life and the true service of life requires faithfulness to the moral law: ethical fidelity. As "Catholic," Catholic health care institutions have an "ecclesial" identity: they exist in communion with the Church, which provides the principles and norms of conduct that enlighten the conscience and direct decisions. Catholic health care must carry out its mission always within the framework of the moral truths taught by the Church.

Questions and disputes that arise in the area of bioethics continue to arise. Ongoing formation in Catholic moral teaching is necessary, especially in the face of contemporary utilitarian and relativistic currents that have spawned a mentality against life. Such formation must be "authentic," that is, provided by those who faithfully teach and provide moral analysis that is in accord with the authoritative teaching of the Church's Magisterium.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services provides important standards and guidance for Catholic health care ministry in the United States today. Adherence to these directives is necessary for the preservation and deepening of Catholic identity, and for the fulfillment of the mission of Catholic health care.


Service to the sick and the suffering is an integral part of the mission of the Catholic Church. The Church’s mission of charity is exercised in a deeply meaningful way through Catholic health care institutions and ministries. Jesus continues to say to us today: “I was sick and you visited me.” He continues to say to us: “Heal the sick.” This charge, in the context of Catholic health care, requires excellence in medical practice, ethical fidelity, and true Christian charity. It is in this light that health care reform, and Catholic health care’s role going forward, must be viewed.