

## Pope Francis and Catholic Health Care in the USA

Tuesday, March 19, 2013 11:45:00 PM

Pope Francis has set the tone for his papacy and for the whole Church in the years ahead with three concise points in **his homily** on March 14, 2013: "Journeying, building, professing."**[1]** I would suggest there is a clear takeaway for institutions whose mission and identity are bound up with Catholic Christian charity: Do not let worldly concerns transform you into mere social assistance programs or utility-driven "service providers." It is an echo of Benedict XVI's affirmation in ***Deus Caritas Est***, no. 31, which he repeated and emphasized in the introduction to his motu proprio ***On the Service of Charity***: "The Church's charitable activity at all levels must avoid the risk of becoming just another form of organized social assistance." As one of the most predominant forms of the Church's charitable works in the United States, Catholic health care surely has ears to hear this message.

### *Journeying*

Catholic health care has journeyed greatly, both geographically and administratively, through and since its missionary origins in the early days of our country's history. Much has changed in the way health care is delivered and in the way hospitals and caregivers are organized: medical professional associations, technological and scientific knowledge advancement, costs and payment, and governmental involvement have moved health care in novel directions with respect to that original response to the Catholic Christian calling to care for the sick and the poor. The circumstances and means have changed, but the core vocation of bringing both physical and spiritual healing and comfort must not be lost. Catholic health care should not stop moving, as times continue to change, yet it should be "always journeying, in the presence of the Lord, in the light of the Lord, seeking to live with the blamelessness that God asked of Abraham in his promise."**[2]**

### *Building*

Catholic health care has built extensively. According to the **Catholic Health Association**, "Catholic health care systems and facilities are present in all 50 states providing acute care, skilled nursing, and other services including hospice, home health, assisted living and senior housing."**[3]** There are 630 Catholic hospitals in the United States with 641,000 full-time employees, which handle over 5,450,000 patient admissions and 100,000,000 outpatient visits per year.**[4]** Most significantly, Catholic health care has built in the Church's spirit of charity: "Catholic hospitals often provide a higher percentage of public health and specialty services than other health care providers. These organizations' dedication to the common good often leads them to offer these traditionally 'unprofitable' services."**[5]**

The foundations are solid, and the building continues. How it continues to be built is a serious challenge in light of the recent and upcoming changes in health care in the United States, especially the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (2010) with its preventive services mandate

requiring the provision of contraception, abortion-inducing drugs and devices, and surgical sterilizations as part of virtually every medical insurance plan, with no exemption to date for Catholic hospitals. The Church condemns these attacks on marriage, family, and life as intrinsic evils. Building Catholic health care is part of building the Church: “We speak of . . . building the Church, the Bride of Christ, on the cornerstone that is the Lord himself.”**[6]** We should not stop building Catholic health care as times and circumstances change, but we cannot build it properly without “living stones, anointed by the Holy Spirit,”**[7]** willing to ensure that its foundation is Christ.

### *Professing*

Jesus Christ is crucified and we cannot profess him without the Cross. “When we journey without the Cross, when we build without the Cross, when we profess without the Cross, we are not disciples of the Lord, we are worldly.”**[8]** Catholic health care may journey far and build extensively, “but if we do not profess Jesus Christ, things go wrong.”**[9]** It is not hard to shift the focus from the fullness of the Christian message to those aspects which will fit with the demands of the world here and now. An organization need not be Catholic to be classified as a non-profit charitable organization. But the government’s definition of charity is not Christ crucified: “We may become a charitable NGO, but not the Church, the Bride of the Lord.”**[10]** As his Bride, will we accept him fully or only those features of his which fit our interests? Will we proclaim him faithfully or present him in a false light to avoid persecution, to avoid the Cross? We must carefully weigh the words of Pope Francis: “When we do not profess Jesus Christ, we profess the worldliness of the devil.”**[11]**

### *Pray for Us*

Pope Francis is hardly naïve or unaware of the challenges faced by the Church and her charitable activities. “Things are not always straightforward, because in journeying, building, professing, there can sometimes be jolts, movements that are not properly part of the journey: movements that pull us back.”**[12]** The way of the Lord may be difficult to discern in Catholic health care today, but the obligation—the need—to find him and to build for, with, and through him, remains stronger than ever. Pope Francis concluded his first homily as the Bishop of Rome by invoking the Holy Spirit to grant the entire Church a fundamental grace, which is essential to the mission and identity of Catholic health care in particular: “to walk, to build, to profess Jesus Christ crucified.”

John A. Di Camillo, Be.L.