



## A MESSAGE FROM THE INTERNATIONAL ECCLESIASTICAL ASSISTANT

December 2017

First of all, I would like to wish all of you a blessed Advent and Christmas season. May the virtue of hope, which is so much a part of the Scripture readings at Mass during this time of the Church year, continue to inspire all of you in your work of healing throughout 2018.

Secondly, let me apologize for missing the September message. Although I am still adjusting to my new responsibilities as Provincial of my Franciscan community in the Midwest section of the United States, I know that this is not an excuse. My New Year's resolution is to be better in my communications with all of you. (Making such resolutions at the beginning of the year is a custom in my country – I don't know whether it is done in other countries or not.)

Last month, several members of CICIAMS were privileged to be in Rome as participants in the 32<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on Health Care, "Addressing Global Health Inequalities," co-sponsored by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development and by the International Confederation of Catholic Health-Care Institutions (CIISAC). Although it will likely take a year for the proceedings of the conference to be available, I would like to give you an overview of the meeting. As typical of a Vatican conference, there were over three dozen talks within a period of two-and-a-half days.

Cardinal Peter Turkson, the Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, placed the theme of the conference in perspective by citing troubling statistics: One-third of the people of the world have no access to life-saving medications, and in many countries (such as the United States) persons with life-threatening diseases can lose everything they own trying to pay for expensive medications. Two million people die every year from diseases that are curable. This situation continues to exist, even though Catholic teaching since at least the time of Pope John XXIII has maintained that all have a right to adequate health care.

Over the following two days, speakers addressed these challenges from a variety of perspectives. As would be expected, many presentations dealt with health inequalities among nations, especially between the global north and south. Some groups, such as

*Caritas Internationalis* and the Medicines for Malaria Venture, explained what they are currently doing to ease health care inequalities, especially in developing nations. Other groups challenged the participants to think about disease and healing in innovative ways, including how technology can be used as a means to reduce inequality rather than increase it.

The conference addressed other aspects of inequality – for example, health care inequalities within nations, inequalities arising from the nature of the disease and its frequency or rarity, and inequalities because of the stigma of the disease, such as HIV or mental health issues. Other speakers addressed social issues that give rise to health care inequalities – for example, war and violence or the problems that prisoners or refugees face. Cardinal Mario Zenari, the Apostolic Nuncio to Syria, put these latter issues into perspective with a personal and moving testimony regarding the war in Syria. Speaking of the Book of Lamentations, he asked, “Who can heal Syria when no health care exists?”

Particular Catholic elements were an essential part of the presentations. Speakers spoke about the virtue of solidarity and the global common good. Others addressed the necessity for person-centered care and the principle of human dignity. The conference discussed the importance of pastoral care and spirituality. On the final day of the conference, Cardinal Turkson opened the floor to any participants who wanted to speak. A robust discussion followed.

In the last session of the conference, Mr. Anthony Tersigni, the International President of CIISAC, explained to participants that in order to have greater collaboration among Catholic health care institutions, we need a more complete picture of the global Catholic health care environment. CIISAC is now in the process of developing a website to enhance such collaboration. The website will foster communication among the various Catholic health care institutions and workers. For example, Mr. Tersigni envisions a particular place on the website for communication among nurses and medico-social workers in Catholic health care settings throughout the world. Although a technician demonstrated the capacity of the future website, it will not be functional until sometime in 2018. All in all, it was a very helpful conference in dealing with the issue of inequality.

I would like to close this message on a Franciscan note, as Saint Francis had a special devotion to Christmas. For him it was the feast that showed that God’s love for us is so deep that it must take on our own flesh. As nurses, midwives, and medico-social workers, you all also make God’s love incarnate – in you that love takes on flesh. I hope that all of you enjoy a blessed Christmas season and pray that you will have a holy 2018. May God abundantly bless all of you and your ministries of health and healing.

Fr. Tom Nairn, OFM

For those of you who may want to get in touch with me, I have a new email:  
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