



## A MESSAGE FROM THE INTERNATIONAL ECCLESIASTICAL ASSISTANT

Spring 2017

O God, You who make this sacred Easter time radiant  
with the glory of the Lord's resurrection,  
stir up in your Church a spirit of adoption, so that,  
renewed in body and mind,  
we may render you undivided service.

(Adapted from the opening prayer of the Easter vigil)

In March of this year, I hosted approximately 70 Catholic health care ethicists from the United States and Canada at the annual Theology and Ethics Colloquium of the Catholic Health Association of the United States. Normally, the colloquium deals with an issue in clinical or organizational ethics. This year, however, we spent almost three days analyzing a favorite metaphor of Pope Francis and asked what his image of the Church as "field hospital" can mean for Catholic health care. The following reflection is my own, but it is based on two of the talks that were given at the colloquium, one by a Jesuit priest and physician, Fr. Myles Sheehan, and the other by a young professor of Catholic social ethics at St. John's University in New York City, Professor Meghan Clark.

Most of us have heard Pope Francis talk about this image, but I would like to ask the members of CICIAMS to think about how the image of field hospital might shed light on what it means to be a Catholic nurse or medical worker today.

About six months after his election, Pope Francis was asked by an interviewer, "What kind of Church do you dream of?" His response was surprising at the time:

I see clearly that the thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the Church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds.

He returned to this image several times in his papacy, most recently during the Jubilee Year of Mercy. Reflection on the image reveals the many layers of meaning that it offers to those who are called to serve the needs of our sick sisters and brothers. Although I can't do justice to all of the nuances that we addressed during the colloquium, I would like to single out two elements which for me were especially important.

In his talk, Fr. Sheehan rooted the pope's image of a field hospital in Jesuit spirituality and invited those present to enter into what Jesuits call the "*magis*" [doing something "more completely" or "to a higher degree"] – doing more for Christ and doing what is most useful or most important for other whom we serve. Quoting the Jesuit Constitutions, he explained that Jesuits are called to "make the best choice in sending persons where there will be the greater service to God and the more universal good. All things being equal, one ought to select that part of the vineyard that has the greatest need, both because of lack of other workers and because of the infirmity of the people there."

Similarly, in his book *The Name of God is Mercy*, Pope Francis explains that "it is necessary to go out from the Church and parishes, to go outside and look for people where they live, where they suffer, and where they hope. . . .to reveal the Church's deeply maternal and merciful side, a Church that goes forth toward those who are 'wounded,' who are in need of an attentive ear, understanding, forgiveness, and love." The pope adds that in moving out to those who have been marginalized, by welcoming them, "we put our credibility as Christians on the line."

Professor Clark explained that the image of field hospital encourages Christians to embrace our suffering sisters and brothers with humility and to "become more attentive and responsive to the deep and emergency needs of those around us." She acknowledged that in the chaos of a field hospital, "there is a danger of accepting the limitations of an emergency triage as the norm." To counter this, she suggested that "the principle that helps us avoid getting lost in the limitations and brokenness of our current reality is justice." She went on to say that the field hospital must always be directed towards justice. By focusing on inclusion rather than exclusion and on the effects of inequality and marginalization, we are able to see that poverty affects real people's lives. As we enter the chaos of the other person, we join together with them to combat injustice and exclusion.

Do these two ideas have anything to say to members of CICIAMS? It seems to me that at the very least, it reminds us that although the physical side caring is important, it is not the only responsibility Catholic nurses and health care workers have. You are called to show to those whom you serve the merciful face of God. As Catholic nurses and health care workers, there is always more for you to do. The "Catholic" element of being a Catholic nurse is always unfinished. This should not, however, be a reason to lose hope. Rather it allows all of us (myself included) to ask continually how we can be of better service to God and our sick brothers and sisters.

Secondly, although you might not often think of your work as a matter of justice, you certainly enter into the chaos of people's lives. As Catholic nurses, you are able to help others move beyond their own limitations and brokenness. As ministers of mercy you are called to be attentive and responsive to those you serve, focusing on inclusion rather than exclusion.

I began this reflection by paraphrasing the opening prayer from the Easter Vigil. As we see our task as Catholic health care workers (and I include myself in this) in light of the image of field hospital, let us remember that it is God who stirs up in us a spirit of adoption and it is God who continually renews us in body and mind, so that we may do not lose hope but

render undivided service to God and show God's love and mercy to all his sick daughters and sons.

May this Easter season continue to be a time of grace for all of you.

Fr. Tom Nairn, OFM