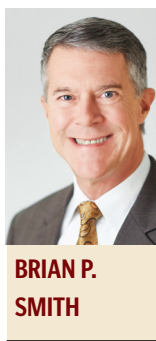


# BACK TO THE BASICS

**M**y two favorite times of year to watch sports are the few weeks as summer transitions into early fall and then as late winter warms into spring. For just those few weeks, you can watch professional football, basketball, hockey and baseball at the same time. I especially find it amusing when as reporters interview the coaches after a game or practice, they all say the same thing, regardless of the sport: “We need to get back to basics.” They may elaborate on what that means for the specific sport they coach: “block and tackle,” “pass and shoot” or “field and hit.” But they all basically make the same point: to be a great team or be the best at something requires you to put time into practicing the rudimentary skills of that sport or activity. We simply can not skip the fundamentals and expect to excel.



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Sport psychologists refer to the phenomenon of practicing the same drill over and over as creating “muscle memory.” The idea is that if you practice something often enough, you will create neural pathways that will automatically kick in when you are in a situation that you have rehearsed many times before. This is true not only for athletes, but for musicians, skilled laborers, chefs and others who wish to excel in their field. We all have heard the phrase “practice makes perfect.”

Aristotle taught that virtues are developed through learning and practice. St. Thomas Aquinas built upon that definition and said, “a virtue is a habit that disposes an agent to perform its proper operation or movement.”<sup>1</sup> A person can develop a virtue like self-discipline, patience or charity by repeated practice. To help us put a virtue we aspire to into greater practice, we want to increase the muscle memory of the spirit by developing spiritual habits. To use our sport metaphor, we get back to the basics through prayer, reflection and an examination of conscience. We do not become virtuous overnight, but by cultivating habits, we gradually can. And when we slip and are less virtuous than what we hope to be, we usually go back to the basics and start over again.

## WHAT ARE OUR BASICS?

Over the past two years of the coronavirus pandemic, I have heard many people talk about all the innovations and transformations that have occurred in health care. Before the pandemic, a few systems were exploring telehealth, but now

everyone has developed it. Before, working remotely was considered novel in health care, however now we can’t imagine not attending some of our meetings, educational sessions and formation programs virtually. Moreover, integrating care for our providers and others who work in health care was something we were only beginning to explore. Now, well-being and resiliency for our staff is a necessity.

While there has been a lot of attention given to what has changed in health care during the pandemic, I am not so sure we have been paying enough attention to the basics that we cannot forget. Amidst all of the change, adaptation and transformation, it might be easy to forget the essentials. So, let’s review what are the basics, the very fundamentals of Catholic health care that we must go back to as our touchstones.

## We Are a Ministry of Love

Whenever I am leading formation for a group of leaders in Catholic health care, I often begin with what it means to be a ministry of the Church. This inevitably means we discuss the healing ministry of Jesus and that its purpose is to reveal the love of God. In short, to become the love of God in the flesh. The most basic, foundational piece of our health care ministry is the fact that we strive to reveal the love of God through our care to a broken and frail world that needs to know God is still with us.

In the midst of change and high stress, it is easy to get caught up in the latest coronavirus surge, the increasing staff shortages and the ever-changing data and research. But through this chaos, we need to stay laser-focused on the “why” we do all of this work. We believe that in this moment of chaos, God is with us and that through the selfless

giving of health care workers, God's love is being revealed. We may have stopped being thanked by our patients and communities — and some will even think we are crazy — but love is sometimes like that. And, like God's love manifested in Jesus, total unconditional love is definitely not rational.

To be a ministry of love, we need to be aware of God's love in our own lives. We remain connected to God's love through prayer, reflection and other spiritual practices so that we always remember that it is not ourselves individually who are doing the work, but God's grace working through us. Remaining centered in God's love allows us to be God's light and presence in the world.

### **We Are a Community**

One of the distinct elements of ministry in the Church is that it is always done in community on behalf of the community. We are not lone rangers. People who work in a ministry realize it is not through their own personal skills or efforts that they bring God's presence to the world. Instead, it is God's grace, something beyond our human skills, that makes moments of care truly healing. We also recognize that the ministry each of us is involved in is done on behalf of the community. We care not as individual practitioners, but as a member of a care team that is part of a facility, a health system and a sponsored ministry of the Church. We hardly can say we are doing this alone. Our patients and residents do not see the hundreds and thousands of people who support the work of our clinicians, but we must remember we are part of a community and represent it wholly.

St. Paul used the metaphor of the parts of the body which make up its whole when he wrote to the church in Corinth, stating "Now you are Christ's body, and individually parts of it." (1 Corinthians 12:27) He reminded them that no part of the body can tell another part, "I don't need you," or say that "I am more important than you." We are all members of the Body of Christ and we only function as the way God intended us to when we act as one community.

Are we in leadership making sure that every member of our organization knows they are important to the body? Are we caring for all of our

caregivers and recognizing that when one member of the team suffers, the whole team suffers? And for our colleagues who work remotely, how do we ensure they remain connected to the body and feel they are part of the community? COVID has strained our healing communities, and we must pay attention to the members of the body so we can continue this ministry.

### **Persons and Communities Need Renewal**

The Gospels give us several examples of Jesus personally going off to pray alone and sometimes gathering the disciples with him to "get away from the crowds." The need for renewal, refreshment and time to reflect on where God is now and where God is calling us is another basic element we must remember. Admittedly, it has been hard for health care leaders and frontline staff to "get away from the crowds" during the pandemic. We cannot tell patients backed up in an emergency

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department that the staff are on retreat and we will get back to them in a few days.

In the short term, our best efforts for renewal and restoration come from reminding our staff to take time for themselves, to pray and to spend time with nature and with loved ones. Providing caregivers with short meditation and reflection resources through internal websites and CHA Well-Being resources has proven an effective short-term solution for members.<sup>2</sup> Encouraging people to take vacation time when COVID surges are declining is another strategy. We may not be able to travel where we would like to, but taking the time to get away, decompress and renew ourselves is essential.

In the long term, we need to be thinking about what kind of rejuvenation we can provide for our

staff who are burned out. Are we making sure that well-being is something we include in our long-term strategies, and are we budgeting for it? Are we creating formation resources that can be offered virtually, in-person and in a hybrid mode? Where possible, can we take staff offsite to a retreat center and offer spiritual renewal opportunities that meet the needs of a religiously diverse workforce? Caring for the members of the body who are hurting is necessary for the whole body to function as it should.

### CREATING MUSCLE MEMORY

I have heard many seasoned mission leaders and sponsors liken what we have been going through the past two years to the early beginnings many of the founding congregations of our ministry faced as they were getting started in the United States. Many of our health care facilities started to meet the needs of people during pandemics and epidemics. Some systems used stories of the founding congregations to inspire their staff and remind them that we have been through many crises before and we will get through this pandemic. Thankfully, pandemics do not happen as often as they used to.

The fact that we are drawing from our past heritage is encouraging. It suggests that some muscle memory has developed in our organizations even during times when there are fewer sisters to remind us. The muscle memory is now being passed on to the laity working in our facilities. This speaks to the importance of orientation and formation for our staff so that when they are in a situation the ministry has faced before, they draw on the stories and inspiration of others who lived through similar situations.

But creating muscle memory is more than retelling stories. Returning to our earlier sports analogy, spring training in baseball does not consist solely of telling the stories of the great players who came before them and how championships were won. Those narratives are definitely told, but then the teams actually practice what their predecessors did, and then these fundamentals create skills that become the muscle memory.

For us in Catholic health care, after telling the inspiring stories of the founders, we need to do what all sport teams, artists and musicians do — we get back to the basics. We remember we are a ministry of God's love and that we ourselves must be grounded in Divine love. We live as a community, caring for the members of our organizations so they know they are not alone and in turn, they can minister in the name of the community. And then, when the worst has passed and we can catch our breath, we make time for renewal and refreshment for ourselves and for our teams.

And if we keep practicing these basics — over and over until they become habit — until they become part of our organizational muscle memory, we begin to experience what it means to be a virtuous organization.

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### NOTES

1. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, First Part of the Second Part, question 49, answer 1.
2. "Resources and Tools," Catholic Health Association, <https://www.chausa.org/well-being/resources-and-tools>.

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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Reprinted from *Health Progress*, Spring 2022, Vol. 103, No. 2  
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