

FINDING A PATH FORWARD THROUGH SYNODALITY

As I was preparing this column, I was still basking in the afterglow of CHA's annual Assembly, which was held in San Diego in June. The Assembly is the largest in-person gathering of Catholic health care leaders, which is convened by CHA every other year. It was a wonderful opportunity to learn, reconnect with friends and colleagues, and celebrate the good work being done by all our ministries in extending the healing mission of Jesus Christ.



One of the highlights of our event was the keynote address offered by Cardinal Robert McElroy of San Diego, sharing his experience at the Synod on Synodality and what that might mean for us in Catholic health care. Cardinal McElroy reflected on four central questions for Catholic health care providers to ponder that have emerged

from the Church's synodal process. Those questions are:

- How should Catholic health care build a culture of discernment?
- How can the ministry contribute to Catholic theology and the renewal of moral theology?
- How should the ministry bring a consistently Christ-like pastoral stance to Catholic health care institutions?
- What is the countercultural mission of Catholic health care in the present moment?

I invite us all to reflect on these critical questions and consider how they might help guide our strategies and priorities as a ministry in the increasingly challenging years ahead. Specifically, how might we help to bridge the economic, political, geographic, workplace and religious divides that surround us in a way that builds unity for the betterment of our ministries, those we serve and the communities in which we live?

How should Catholic health care build a culture of discernment?

On the question of building a culture of discern-

ment, Cardinal McElroy said that it must be “rooted in perceiving the presence of God, listening, truly listening, with profound respect to the voices of others, and make all feel included and respected.”¹ As leaders in Catholic health care, we can help build such a discerning culture. We must ensure that, beginning with the recruitment and onboarding of staff, all our strategies, policies, procedures and activities are aligned with our mission and core values. Are those we hire, especially in leadership roles, passionate and committed to the mission of the ministry? Are we inclusive and welcoming of all people, regardless of their background, as long as they are dedicated to furthering the mission of Catholic health care? Only then can we build a discerning culture, which is, after all, made up of people.

And when we do bring new people on board, are they oriented to the history, charisma and values of the ministry? Are staff, at all levels, provided with ongoing formation that clearly connects the work to the organization's mission? Only then will leaders and staff be informed, prepared and accustomed to approaching every question, issue, decision and strategy with a discerning mindset that reflects the ministry's mission and values.

Though the mission leader should certainly be a model and catalyst, this task is not one to be assigned to the mission leader alone but rather to every leader in our ministries. As Cardinal McElroy indicated, in listening respectfully to the voices and experiences of others, including those with whom we might disagree, we can hear the voice of the Holy Spirit, who is always calling us back to the sacred foundation of our work.

How can the ministry contribute to Catholic theology and the renewal of moral theology?

On contributing to Catholic theology, Cardinal McElroy said that those involved in the Catholic health care ministry must be involved because “at critical junctures, the Church’s mission to heal the sick raises key elements of emergent realities that must be addressed by the Church’s theology and teaching.”² In response to this important need, CHA recently established the Center for Theology and Ethics in Catholic Health to support Catholic health care systems in addressing the many complex issues that arise as we pursue our mission.

The new center, headed by Daniel Daly, PhD, an associate professor of moral theology at Boston College, will foster dialogue, encourage faithful scholarship and provide consultation around pressing theological and ethical concerns. While the new center is in its early days of existence and much work is yet to be done, some goals include: convening health care practitioners and experts on broad health care challenges to facilitate thoughtful and theologically grounded solutions; publishing research on these challenges, inviting experts to lecture on them and, as appropriate, disseminating discussed results to those who can leverage change; and providing guidance to bishops and diocesan health care liaisons on Catholic health care and emerging issues.³

How should the ministry bring a consistently Christ-like pastoral stance to Catholic health care institutions?

On the question of how the ministry can bring Jesus’ love into the world, Cardinal McElroy noted, “Pope Francis has made this pastoral dimension of our faith the foundation of his pontificate.” He said that Catholic health care providers “must wrestle with how to make this inclusive, loving, compassionate, nonjudgmental healing presence resonate throughout its ministries and institutions in this hypercompetitive environment.”⁴ At the macro level, we must always strive to live the Gospel values, both personally and institutionally. This means welcoming all of God’s people into our ministries — staff, patients, families and communities — and attending to their spiritual health as we would their physical well-being, regardless of their religious or spiritual background.

This all-inclusive approach — which is not always easy — should set us apart and create a more Christ-like, pastoral workplace and care environ-



Cardinal Robert W. McElroy of the Diocese of San Diego poses questions related to Catholic health care and synodality during his remarks at CHA’s Assembly this past June.

ment. I’m reminded of when a dear friend and Incarnate Word Sister was pressed by an emergency room nursing director at one of our formation sessions for leaders, “It is sometimes really hard to see Christ in others, be they patients, colleagues or family members.” To this, the sister replied, “If you can’t see Christ in the other, ‘be’ Christ to the other.” The flame of the Divine burns in each of us, and we must reflect that light into the world, both individually and organizationally.

What is the countercultural mission of Catholic health care in the present moment?

On being a countercultural force in society, Cardinal McElroy said that, in part, this means “serving most strenuously those in society whom our culture discards and ignores: the destitute, the undocumented, the unborn, the mentally ill.” One of the seven core competencies for mission leaders is, in fact, advocacy. We in Catholic health care are uniquely positioned to hear the voices of those in vulnerable populations and then passionately

advocate on their behalf, with a preferential option for those who are marginalized and affected by poverty and a focus on ending systemic racism and injustice that lead to health disparities.

We must engage community and system leaders in dialogue to ensure strategy, decisions, policies and budgets demonstrate a tangible commitment to justice, solidarity and right relationship.

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We must be intricately involved in setting advocacy priorities and collaborating with stakeholders to meet the demonstrated needs of the community.

This advocacy encompasses the needs of patients, residents, families and co-workers, as well as the wider community. Catholic health care leaders must strive to encourage all associates and community leaders to follow the Gospel values demonstrated in the example of Jesus Christ. Like the synodal process itself, we must listen with profound respect to the voices of others and actively advocate on their behalf.

A UNITED VOICE FOR BOLD CHANGE

As noted in a recent article in *America: The Jesuit Review*, Fr. John English, SJ, and Fr. George Schemel, SJ, founder of multiple spirituality centers in the United States, co-founded a group in the late 1970s called Ignatian Spiritual Exercises for the Corporate Person, which included Fr. James Borbely, SJ, Marita Carew, RSHM, John Haley and Sr. Judith Roemer. They developed a method for organizational discernment, which they published in three volumes. The method guided groups through three questions: Who are you, as a group, before God? What do you do (or what are you called to do)? And how do you do it?⁵

Simply put, these are the questions we must ask ourselves as Catholic health care leaders. I'm betting that, although we all come from various and diverse backgrounds, geographies and cultures, our answers won't deviate from our shared mission. As Cardinal McElroy commented in his Assembly speech, "One of the most striking realities reflected in our national dialogues was the commonality of the questions and perceptions of the people of God across dioceses, regions and cultures within our country. ... the major joys, the hopes, the sorrows and the fears of God's people were remarkably similar from place to place."⁶ Only by acting together, as the wider "we," can we empower bold change to elevate human flourishing.

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NOTES

1. Lisa Eisenhauer, "Cardinal McElroy Poses Four Questions for Catholic Health Care from Synod," *Catholic Health World* 40, no. 7 (July 2024): <https://www.chausa.org/publications/catholic-health-world/archive/article/june-2024/cardinal-mcelroy-poses-four-questions-for-catholic-health-care-from-synod>.
2. Eisenhauer, "Cardinal McElroy Poses Four Questions for Catholic Health Care from Synod."
3. Julie Minda, "CHA Debuts Theology & Ethics Center, Names Executive Director," *Catholic Health World* 39, no. 20 (December 15, 2023): <https://www.chausa.org/publications/catholic-health-world/archive/article/december-15-2023/cha-debuts-theology-ethics-center-names-centers-executive-director>.
4. Eisenhauer, "Cardinal McElroy Poses Four Questions."
5. Colleen Dulle, "The Jesuit Roots of the Synod's 'Conversations in the Spirit,'" *America: The Jesuit Review*, July 30, 2024, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2024/07/30/conversation-spirit-synod-248471>.
6. Eisenhauer, "Cardinal McElroy Poses Four Questions."

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