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Addresses

The Church and the role of the Catholic health-care provider

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A friend told me a story recently that stuck in my memory, and it might be a good way to begin our brief time together this evening. Some of you will remember that 40 years or so ago, Penn Central was one of the largest railroad companies in America. Railroads are still important today, but back in the 1950s and '60s, they had a pretty big role in the economy.

Penn Central ran into financial problems. Then it went bankrupt in a very public and ugly way — and a lot of people lost their jobs or their investments. Years later, my friend talked with one of the attorneys who handled the Penn Central breakup, and she asked him what had gone wrong. The lawyer answered that the directors of Penn Central thought they were in the railway business — but they weren't. They were in the *transportation* business. The transportation business had changed. Penn Central didn't.

I think we can find two lessons here. The first is obvious. An enterprise needs to understand the market and the people it serves. And when appropriate, it needs to adapt its methods in order to serve them better. Penn Central didn't do that.

The second lesson is even more useful. Every enterprise needs to remember its basic mission. It needs to stay faithful to its core purpose. The mission of Penn Central was to move people and goods effectively and profitably. Whether they did it by rail or used some other method was important — but secondary. Their core purpose was good transportation. Penn Central forgot that.

Now obviously, Catholic health care is quite a different animal from Penn Central. No one in Catholic health care is driven *essentially* by profits. Strong finances are important, but that's not the heart of the Catholic health-care mission. Catholic health care is essentially a ministry, and all of us in this room understand that it's a ministry facing very heavy financial pressures today. So people like yourselves, who labor so hard to keep Catholic hospitals open and serving the public, deserve the gratitude of everyone in the Church.

You know, my mother turned 90 this year, and she's always been a very strong and independent woman. But when you get to her age, the body begins to fail. That's just part of life. This year, for the first time, she's had serious health problems, so I've tried to get back to Kansas more frequently to be with her.

We don't have a Catholic medical center in my mother's town, and when someone you love is struggling with an illness or old age, you remember very clearly why Catholic health care is so important. My family and I want to know that our mother is in the hands of people who see life and death through the lens of the Gospel; who really understand the dignity of the human person; and who serve Jesus Christ and Catholic teaching about the sacredness of life.

Our local hospital in Kansas is a good one, but it's not Catholic. And that makes a difference — the spirit just isn't the same. Luckily, we do have a good Catholic senior-care community in Concordia, and its assisted-living facility has helped my mother a great deal. My point is, people who are sick or frail usually struggle with fear, loneliness and other kinds of mental distress. I've seen this not just as a priest, but now also as a son. At their best, Catholic health care and eldercare providers touch people in exactly the same way Jesus touched the suffering in the Gospel.

I don't need to remind this group that much of Jesus' public ministry involved miracles of healing. He had a reason for that. The human person is created in the image of God Himself, and Christ healed the body to *teach the mind* and *convert the heart* of God's people. The second reading in Mass today quoted St. Paul, where he tells the Corinthians:

Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for the temple of God, which you are, is holy (1 Cor: 16-17).

Those are strong words – strong words of encouragement, and also strong words of warning. Revering and serving human health gives glory to God. The work you do in Catholic health care is a corporal work of mercy, and it *gives glory to God*. Likewise, violence against the human person – the violence of abortion, infanticide and assisted suicide, and the violence of reproductive or genetic techniques that turn the human embryo and fetus into objects of manipulation – is violence directed against God Himself.

When you go home this evening, reread the Epistle of James. It'll take you less than 15 minutes. James urges us to “be doers of the word, and not just hearers.” He reminds us that “faith, if it does not have works, is dead.” In other words, personal faith needs to have practical, public consequences – or it's just a collection of sentimental pieties. Catholic health care should, above all, be an expression of our Catholic identity. Remember the Gospel of Matthew 28:19, where Jesus says, “Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you . . .”

That's our mission statement – for the Church as a whole, for Catholic health care as a ministry, and for each one of us individually. *Act on your faith. Go and convert the world.* Now obviously I'm not suggesting that Catholic hospitals should explicitly proselytize their staff or their patients. It would be very strange — and also wrong — for somebody to go the emergency room for broken leg, and be forced into a catechism class while they wait. As believers we have a *primary* vocation as missionaries. But we need to adapt that to our own particular skills and the circumstances of our daily life, including our professions. But we still need to be missionaries — consciously and methodically.

Jesus didn't say, “Go and engage in an interesting dialogue.” He didn't say, “Go and be polite to everybody, making sure not to overstate your views.” Jesus wasn't a politician. He was and is the redeemer of man — and everything about His message has gravity, urgency and absolute uniqueness. And I think we sometimes try too hard in the public arena to evade that. In fact, I think that's the biggest single mistake American Catholics have made over the past 40 years. We've been *too* eager to compromise. We've been *too* eager to assimilate. Compromise and dialogue, “being polite” and assimilating, are very good things in their place. But they become bad things when we make them an excuse to minimize our witness or downplay our Catholic identity.

There are countries like China and Iran where Catholics are legitimately very careful about witnessing their faith publicly. But we're not in Iran or China. We're in the greatest pluralist democracy in the world. And pluralism is only served if people of faith assert their religious identity and mission confidently in the public square, and don't mute it, out of some mistaken sense of good manners. *The truth always serves the common good.* Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” So the main work of our vocation as Catholics, no matter what our profession, is to bring Jesus Christ to the world, and the world to Jesus Christ.

I want to leave you with two thoughts.

First: You already know this, but I want to say again that all of you here tonight have my respect and my friendship as a bishop, but even more, my gratitude as a priest and a son. Never doubt the fruitfulness of what you do. Never doubt the thankfulness which thousands of people feel, all over northern Colorado, for your service. And I hope we can find ways for the archdiocese to support and cooperate with and encourage your work in important ways — and new ways — in the future.

Second: Remember your mission. Be faithful to your identity. I know Catholic health care needs to adapt, just to survive, in a market that constantly becomes more difficult. I also know Catholic health care is under constant pressure to compromise on issues like contraception, sterilization, and others. Don't do it. Contraception is wrong. And not just wrong, but seriously wrong — all the time. Sterilization is wrong. And not just wrong, but seriously wrong — all the time.

Catholic ministries, including Catholic health care, are only worth doing if they're rooted *without compromise* in the truth of Catholic teaching. The truth is the greatest gift we have to offer the world, even if it sometimes seems like a sign of contradiction. So trust in your Catholic identity and stay true to your core purpose — and God, in His time, will lead you to the fruitfulness you deserve

Thank you for welcoming me with such warmth and friendship tonight. You'll be in prayers in these last weeks of the Jubilee Year. Please remember me in yours.