



Medicine & Morals

A Publication of the
CANADIAN CATHOLIC BIOETHICS INSTITUTE
AT ASSUMPTION UNIVERSITY

Fall 2015 | Issue 2

The Good Catholic Nurse Fr. Leo Walsh, CSB, STD

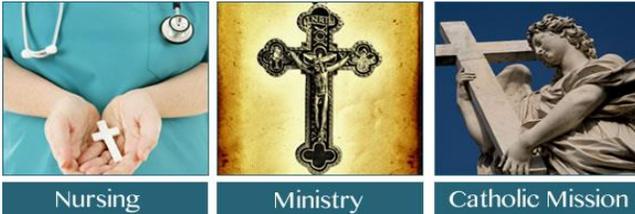
I was looking out of a window which took up a whole wall of the room, captivated by the sight of a mother and her three children (12, 10 and 8) all interacting with shouts and laughter, the children in the pool, the mother on terra firma. This was true goodness on display. I knew something of the goodness of the mother from another incident. She is a nurse, and like a lot of nurses is run off her feet, but she “broke the rules” to accompany a dying woman, to hold her hand so that she wouldn’t die alone. It isn’t a surprise that the mother is also a good nurse, because virtue extends to all aspects of a person’s life.

First, the nurse has to be knowledgeable in medical matters. Years of formal education in various fields of healthcare assure this for the nurse who is a responsible person. This is followed by formal training on the job as well as experience gained by actual nursing.

Second, the good nurse has to strive after the virtues in general, and especially the virtue of compassion which, like all virtues, can grow indefinitely. Each act of compassion deepens the virtue itself. Compassion is one of the daughters of love, in this case, love of the vulnerable other. All patients are personally depleted, simply by being

patients. Many suffer physical pain or discomfort, many are psychologically compromised, others emotionally unstable, others again spiritually ill at ease. The compassionate nurse reaches out to each patient in his or her particular needs. The patient is an individual person with his or her unique history, personal relationships, unique fears, hopes and dreams.

One constituent element of a human person is spirituality. Each person embraces a meaning which is ultimate for him or her. Many people relate to a personal ultimate meaning, to God, who transcends what human persons can comprehend and who guarantees life after death. Others reject the notion of a transcendent Being, and find ultimate meaning in life which inevitably and totally ends with death. Both sets of people can rejoice in proximate meanings which can relate to ultimate meaning. For example, the person who accepts the God of love as ultimate meaning can rejoice in the beauty of the earth, be stunned by the generosity of people, be moved by beautiful music or fine acting. Our mother/nurse above finds proximate meaning in her children and in her patients. Her ultimate meaning extends



to all things that can be related to her God: her husband's love, the love of family and friends – to a myriad of things that proclaim the glory of God. People may be united in their worship of God and in the ways that this is expressed in prayer, liturgy and matters of social justice.

So far, we have been speaking about the good nurse herself, as her goodness deepens. (I am aware that there are good male nurses. The feminine usage is for sake of brevity.) Now we turn to the role of the nurse in the spiritual care of the patient. As we said above, each person is essentially spiritual, no matter how that spirituality unfolds in his or her life.

In an excellent article on care of the elderly (Bioethics Matters, June 2015), Moira McQueen acknowledges the obvious fact that staff (of hospitals, hospices and the like) cannot be expected to be all things to all people. McQueen is here appealing for the involvement of Christians generally as volunteers to be involved in the spiritual care of the elderly. Hospitals and other healthcare facilities do provide well or not so well for the spiritual care of patients. There are chaplains whose full-time work is dealing with the spiritual needs of patients. Often there are volunteers who also provide spiritual care. Good as all of this is, however, it does not absolve a nurse from engagement with her patients in the spiritual dimensions of their lives. The

nurse cares for the whole person of her patient.

The area of a patient's spirituality has to be approached with great delicacy. The reason why the patient is in a healthcare facility is not for spiritual guidance, but because he or she is in need of physical and/or mental assistance. These matters are not secret to the medical personnel and the patient is generally not opposed to discussing them with the nurse. It is altogether different with spiritual concerns in a culture that is becoming progressively secular and where the spiritual aspect of a patient's person is considered to be eminently private. Yet often a patient would like to deal with spiritual matters, if only there were an opening to do so.

Here we will restrict the discussion to those persons who have faith, as this is generally understood. To be able to be in a comfort zone should such an opportunity present itself to interact with such patients, a good nurse should be able to relate to people of different faiths. A book by J. Kirstine Griffith will enable the nurse to have a basic understanding of the most common faiths, *The Religious Aspects of Nursing Care* (First Edition, 1996; Digital Edition 2009).

The Catholic nurse should not try to convert anyone to her own religious beliefs, overtly or more subtly. In these days of lawsuits, she should be careful in her approach to caring spiritually for her patients, exercising the virtue of prudence at all times. Prudence, though, is not a craven virtue. When necessary it can urge action. At all times, the Catholic nurse will love her patients as

Christ does, serving them with compassion and tenderness.

One particular difficulty for a Catholic nurse is that told to me by a young nurse this week. She says that her desire to serve her patients sometimes seems to contradict her moral conscience. She explained about her difficulties in caring for women who choose to abort their babies, seemingly in good faith, or continuing to treat aggressively patients who should be allowed to die, but whose relatives insist that everything be done. In an upcoming edition, we will deal with the complex matter of cooperation in evil.

Specifically, how should a Catholic nurse understand her calling to serve her patients spiritually? Everything that we have already indicated about all good nurses holds, of course. A Catholic nurse should be in relationship with Jesus Christ, to learn from his example how to deal with the sick and vulnerable, and how to draw strength from him to love her patients in service of Christ himself. She should be vitally aware of the truths of her faith as unveiling the mystery of God, though as mirrored darkly. She should understand the sacramental dimension of her faith, especially the Eucharist and the Sacrament of the Sick. She should have some understanding of the problem of evil and the matter of human suffering. She should be well versed in the moral teaching of her Church in bioethical matters. She should be a person of faith, hope and love.

Leo Walsh, CSB, STD, is Professor Emeritus, Moral Theology, in the Faculty of Theology, University of St. Michael's College, Pastor of St. Paul's Church in LaSalle, Ontario, Executive Director of Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute at Assumption, Vice-President Academic of Assumption University, Windsor and a staff member of CCBI -Toronto.

Laudato Si': It's about more than the Environment



Maria Giannotti BE.d, MA, MSc (c) Bioethics

Laudato Si' is Pope Francis' Encyclical on the environment or more formally – On Care for Our Common Home. It has been called revolutionary, groundbreaking and radical – 'an encyclical for the ages'. (San Martin 2015) Its title, an Umbrian phrase, comes from the invocation of St. Francis in his Canticle of the Sun, "LAUDATO SI', mi' Signore" – "Praise be to you, my Lord." (1)

An encyclical letter is one of the most formal statements the Pope can make about Catholic Doctrine. Normally, such documents are addressed to the Bishops of the Church or the lay faithful but, similar to Pope Saint John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris*, Pope Francis addresses his message to all of humanity.

The encyclical isn't primarily about policy and it isn't just for Catholics, rather it is a personal message to the world's 1.2 billion Catholics and all non-Catholics alike, for we



all share this home – the earth. Francis seeks to "enter into dialogue with all

people” about human values. Its main theme is the change of heart that we all need: toward greater care of creation, purer intentions in its use and the rediscovery of a true humanism. (Anderson 2015)

Laudato Si' does not provide technical guidance, that he leaves to the experts. Rather its goal is to highlight the ethical dimension of the climate problem and provide fundamental principles to be applied for solutions: the preferential option for the poor, inter- and intra-generational justice, common but differentiated responsibility, and orientation to the common good. (Schellnhuber 2015). Francis passionately makes the humanitarian and spiritual case for acting on climate change through the conservation of resources, the pursuit of renewable energy, and the reduction of greenhouse gases. More importantly he masterfully connects environmental action to our Christian mandate to care for the afflicted and give comfort to the needy. By virtue of his moral authority, Pope Francis has the ability to mobilize people all over the world to take action in whatever way they can.

This encyclical compels us to see climate change as a profoundly moral issue. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace President Cardinal Peter Turkson believes Pope Francis has reinforced the moral argument with a theological one “marrying the humanitarian impulse to the Biblical imperative of ‘creation care’ which holds that humans bear a special responsibility to be good stewards of the earth they have been given.” He goes on to say, Pope Francis puts the concept of integral ecology at the centre of the encyclical as a paradigm to

articulate the fundamental relationships of the person with God, with oneself, with others, and with creation. Francis believes that we are not facing two separate crises, but rather one complex crisis that is both social and environmental. (Longbottom 2015)

Michael McCarthy echoes this in his reflection on *Laudato Si'*: Francis wants us to connect the global inattention to the premature and unnecessary



deaths of the majority of the planet’s population, reflective of a global health crisis, with the disposable utilization of environmental resources. In order to rectify these injustices, *both* human and environmental, we need “to hear the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (49). In doing so, McCarthy notes, he calls for an *integral ecology* that expresses a concern for the environment understood as “a relationship between nature and the society which lives in it.” (139) This approach surely raises questions about the priorities and practices for medical research and development of new technologies to impact clinical care. (McCarthy 2015)

Historically both medical research and healthcare delivery have prioritized the health needs of a few over those of the majority. “This encyclical challenges the bioethics community to consider not only an integral ecology but an integral bioethics that argues for a balance between the

natural cost of advancement with its potential for sustainability and broad applicability for and with the society in which we live.” (McCarthy 2015)



The question at the heart of Laudato Si' is this: "What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?" (160). "This question does not have to do with the environment alone and in isolation; the issue cannot be approached piecemeal". This leads us to ask ourselves about the meaning of existence and its values at the basis of social life: "What is the purpose of our life in this world? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts? What need does the earth have of us?" "Unless we struggle with these deeper issues – says the Pope – I do not believe that our concern for ecology will produce significant results". (160)



References

Pope Francis. Laudato Si' Encyclical Letter May 2015. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

Ines San Martin Vatican Correspondent June 17, 2015 <http://www.cruxnow.com/church/2015/06/17/laudato-si-will-be-an-encyclical-for-the-ages>

Hans Joachim Schellnhuber .Common Ground :The Papal Encyclical, Science and the Protection of Planet Earth June 19, 2015 Postdam Institute for Climate Impact Research. <http://www.ecojesuit.com/full-text-of-the-presentation-of-dr-hans-joachim-schellnhuber/7986>

Ryan Anderson. <http://dailysignal.com/2015/06/18/pope-francis-encyclical-is-about-more-than-climate-change-its-about-culture>

Henry Longbottom, SJ. An Overview of Laudato Si'. <https://thejesuitpost.org/2015/06/an-overview-of-laudato-si/>

Michael P McCarthy. An integrated bioethics: A reflection on Laudato Si' Loyal Bioethics Blog. <http://loyolabioethics.blogspot.ca/2015/06/an-integrated-bioethics-reflection-on.html>

Maria Giannotti is a graduate of Assumption University MA (Pastoral Ministry) and is completing her MSc (Clinical Bioethics) Union Graduate College, Icahn School of Medicine New York this June. Maria is a consultant with the Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute at Assumption University in Windsor, Ontario.