

Improving our health-care ministry

Health-care ministry in our 12-county diocese has been on my mind lately. Perhaps it is because I have had some significant health problems over the past few years. Or perhaps these thoughts come to every bishop who has celebrated a quarter-century or more of ministry in this diocese. Whatever the case, this health-care issue of the *Catholic Courier* provides the perfect opportunity to share some thoughts and dreams with you.

Bernard McQuaid, our founding bishop, started thinking of health-care ministry shortly after he had celebrated his 35th anniversary as bishop of Rochester — and wonderful things resulted. As our diocesan historian, Father Robert McNamara, tells it, "A long bout with pneumonia had necessitated a prolonged period of convalescence in Savanna, Ga. As he lay abed, prostrated by this sickness and unable, for once, to help himself, the Bishop began to think of the sad lot of the aged who had nobody to take care of them. He therefore decided he would 'build a home for the aged that would be worthy of my declining days.'" St. Ann's Home, an institution that has served thousands of elderly women and men over the years, was the result of his musings.

While I have no such grand scheme in mind, nor do I have plans for any new buildings or institutions, I do have a few dreams that I'd like to share.

I dream of adequate health care for all.

The rising number of people without ready access to health care concerns me. According to the latest census figures, nearly 42 million people nationwide have no health-care insurance — many are vulnerable children or frail senior adults. This translates to thousands of people locally without the basic protections so many of us take for granted.

In 1997, I joined my brother bishops of the state of New York in founding Fidelis Care New York, a managed health-care program to take care of the uninsured poor.



Bishop Matthew H. Clark

Along the Way

While it may have started life as a small provider in Brooklyn, in the last seven years it has grown to cover 140,000 lives in 33 counties of the state. It is active in seven out of the eight dioceses of New York state. Only the Rochester Diocese is without the presence of Fidelis and the wonderful work it does. I know many people locally have worked very hard with our hospitals and health-care systems to make sure that Fidelis comes to town, but thus far without much success.

While there may not be much more I can do about this situation at the moment except pray, perhaps someone who reads these words can find a way to change some hearts, open some doors, remove some invisible barriers. Despite these temporary setbacks, I do dream of the day when all the poor have health care available to them. I do dream of the day when Fidelis is active in each one of our 12 counties.

I dream of a vibrant health-care ministry that touches all those in need.

Health-care ministry is another of my concerns. Traditionally, dedicated priests and women and men religious have ministered to the sick and the dying at home and in our health-care institutions. Many such ministers were assigned to larger institutions to insure that the sacraments were readily available to comfort the afflicted and prepare the dying for eternal life. With the number of priests and religious declining dramatically, it is no secret that far fewer ministers these days are assigned as full-time chaplains to these institutions.

More troubling, the priests and pastoral ministers who are serving our parishes are stretched so thin — covering all that was once done by two, three or four associate pastors — that their presence at the bedside of the sick is a less-frequent occurrence these days. And when it does happen, I am told that their presence is sometimes fleeting.

I worry that this haste may be a sign of discomfort, an all-too-human symptom of the inability to come to

grips with our human fragility and mortality. There is something deep inside us all that wants to put pain and suffering behind us and get on with the more pleasant stuff of life.

In a recently published book, Pope John Paul II talks about his early days as a parish priest, visiting the sick for the first time. "They intimidated me," he writes. "A good deal of courage was necessary to present oneself to the suffering and to enter, so to speak, into their physical and spiritual pain without being conditioned by embarrassment and to show to them at least a little loving compassion."

What has made the plight of the parish priest and minister more difficult these days is the way health care is delivered. Hospital stays are shorter, making the timing of visits more difficult. Regional hospitals have replaced small-town facilities, making visits a time-consuming commitment. Sometimes new federal privacy laws make it difficult to locate ailing parishioners at all.

For a long time I have wanted to do something to ensure that love and compassion are at the bedside of all who are in need of the healing presence of Jesus Christ. With this in mind, I have asked Deacon John Nelson to study the situation in our 12-county diocese, both in our institutions and in our parishes. From this study, I have asked him to begin to draft recommendations that, after consultation, will form the beginning of a diocesan pastoral plan for the sick.

I know that his recommendations will involve more training for ordained and lay ministers. I am sure he will recommend ways to recruit, train and coordinate an army of desperately needed parish volunteers. I suspect he will be looking for ways for parishes to cooperate with each other more effectively in providing sacramental celebrations and ministerial presence to those confined in health-care institutions. I would be surprised if his recommendations do not include ways to refocus our existing resources and increase our spending on health-care ministry.

Please pray that this study and its recommendations will be the beginning of a new era in which no one in the Diocese of Rochester should fear suffering or dying alone. This, too, is one of my dreams.

I dream of a Catholic people who make good use of all the sacramental and spiritual helps offered by the church.

A few months ago, while preparing to undergo angioplasty to insert two additional stents into my coro-

nary arteries, I asked Vicar General Father John Mulligan to celebrate with me the sacrament of the sick. Through this great sacrament, I invited the grace of God to strengthen me for the ordeal I was about to undergo, to consecrate my illness once again for God's saving purpose, and to heal me of all that stood in the way of God's will for my life. I cannot begin to tell you of the peace I received from the healing grace of this sacrament.

For many centuries, too few Roman Catholics experienced the joy of receiving this sacrament. Only the dying could receive what was then called extreme unction, a last sacramental anointing that prepared those *in extremis* for death. At the last possible moment a priest was called, in the fond hope that he would somehow arrive in time to assure a happy death. It was a misunderstanding of one of the church's great treasures.

Forty years ago, the Second Vatican Council rightly renamed and re-situated this great sacrament as the anointing of the sick. Recalling the biblical and early history of this sacrament, the post-conciliar church reminded us that this grace-giving sign was for all those who were seriously ill because of disease or old age, and not just for those who were dying. "Are there any sick among you?" the epistle of James asks. "Let them call for the priests of the Church, and let them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord; and this prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and if they have committed sins, they will be forgiven" (5:12).

Christ is present in this sacramental anointing. He strengthens those afflicted by illness, providing them with the strongest means of support. He consoles them during a time of great anxiety, lest they be broken in spirit. He offers healing, in body, mind and spirit.

By confusing the sacrament of the sick with preparation for death, it has been almost forgotten through the years that the church has another special sacrament for the dying: viaticum, that is, the reception of holy Communion by the dying. As the church puts it: "When Christians, in passing from this life, are strengthened by the body and blood of Christ, they have the pledge of the Resurrection which the Lord promised: 'The ones who feed on my flesh and drink my blood have life eternal and I will raise them up on the last day' (John 6:54)."

While one's pastor is the ordinary
Continued on page A4

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