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An International Catholic Health Institute and Medical Service: A Proposal

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In recent years, the Catholic Church in its official statements has stressed the importance which it places on the human family. It is in the family that human beings, made in the image and likeness of God, can best develop into personhood and live out their lives as men and women in peace and love. In no small measure, the future of the Church itself, and of all civilized societies, depends upon the health, wholeness and, most importantly, the holiness or sanctity of the family. It is through the completely healthy family that the values of love, fidelity, justice and concern for the dignity of all human beings will be preserved in the world.

Families in our present world exist in an atmosphere of contradiction. This is an enlightened age, striving toward goals of universal social justice and a higher quality of life for all mankind. On the one hand, we witness a generalized apathy and indifference on the part of individuals and nations toward the weak and the powerless, resulting in death and suffering through hunger and disease. On the other hand, we witness a pragmatic attitude on the part of many physicians aided by many governments, international organizations and other agencies who use modern technology to bring death to the unborn, the handicapped and the aged as the "final solution" to a variety of socio-

economic problems. There exists in our world a modern "black death," a plague that has infected not the bodies but the souls of men and women.

Our society in general, and the medical profession in particular, face fundamental ethical and moral questions of quite a profound nature, not the least of which is the right of all human beings to be born and to receive good health care. Health care is regarded as a basic human right rooted in human dignity. The access to and provision for health care in its broadest sense cannot simply be a question of politics, economics, bureaucracy or expediency. It is an ethical and moral question — a question of justice which must be answered and then guaranteed, especially by our Church and its health professionals.

The Catholic Church has a deep religious commitment to and long historical association with the delivery of health care. Today it is one of the largest private providers of health care throughout the world, not only in terms of its financial investment, but also in the commitment of so many of its members, both religious and lay. The Church also has a rich tradition of ethical wisdom and it has, in recent years especially, consistently promoted and defended Christian values with courage, strength and clarity on the most controverted and complex questions touching family life today. No other international organization has such moral authority or such a unique position of influence throughout the world. However, in the area of family health care, the teaching and work of the Church are not having the impact they should *because the Church is not coordinated on the international level*. At the same time, the opposing forces of secular humanism, though much smaller, are gaining ground simply because they are more efficiently organized. The challenge facing the Church, in my opinion, is how to implement its teachings on social justice issues and medical-moral concerns in a practical way by a more efficient use of its institutions and personnel.

The present activity of the Church in health care in many parts of the world is subject to some criticism and it should, therefore, be open to objective study. Moreover, its very involvement in this area of life is beset with many complex problems. Recent times have seen an increased involvement of governments in national health systems and the appropriation of many institutions pioneered and formerly operated by religious congregations or local churches. At the same time, the number of religious available to undertake the health work of the Church has severely declined. Worse still, there has been a profound moral and ethical change throughout the world resulting in the almost universal acceptance of abortion, sterilization and contraception as "normal health practices." The secularization of health care, coupled with the virtual monopoly by governments of health systems, has left the Church wondering if it has any role in health care delivery at all.

Catholic hospitals have not been isolated from the many destructive effects of the present day domination of the health system by scientific humanism. Many Church hospitals have become indistinguishable from their secular counterparts, have become institutionalized, depersonalized and thus separated from the poor for whom they were founded. Many also have been forced into competition with government hospitals and other denominational facilities and, on occasion, even with other Catholic institutions. The Church, in addition, has built expensive curative units, but at the same time has neglected preventive services. Thus, it has not adequately met the health needs of families and has marginalized the poor who are unable to meet the costs of the services provided.

Of serious consequence has been the relative lack of involvement of the lay Catholic doctors within the present structures of the Church health system despite the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. The Church has until now relied almost exclusively upon the religious sisters and brothers to provide the Catholic presence. Although the Church has periodically issued a challenge to the laity to become more involved, the challenge has been ignored, partly because the laity is used to the religious doing it all and partly because the Church has not made it materially possible for the laity to become part of the structure.

At a time when many in the medical profession have totally rejected the traditional Judeo-Christian ethic of medical practice, others have developed an awful malaise of the spirit, of the mind and of judgment and tried to remain morally neutral. They have adopted a schizophrenic approach in their chosen vocation, separating their religious beliefs from medical practice; sadly, this applies to some Catholics. To follow the noble traditions of Catholic medical practice today demands courage, for much is at stake: career, reputation, financial advancement, academic promotion and often professional and social ostracism. One should not be surprised if one hears the question, "What happened to our Catholic doctors?" And yet, there are thousands of loyal Catholic doctors who would relish the chance to be part of the Church's healing mission more directly, in a more structured way and who would stand together with their religious brothers and sisters throughout the world to professionally witness to these Christian beliefs.

At the present time, the voice of the Church proclaiming its authentic and clear ethical principles of health care delivery is not being heard loudly enough by health care professionals, not only in international and national forums, but also within the Church itself. I do not mean any disrespect to the many national Catholic Physicians' Guilds and other Catholic health agencies represented here. In many countries these organizations do not exist or have unrepresentative membership and are organized only by a few dedicated people in their

spare time. *There does not exist today a full-time international Catholic organization communicating with health groups throughout the world, coordinating their activities and giving them a corporate Catholic identity.* Each is seemingly content to do its own thing with the result that there is inefficiency and an impression of weakness.

On the practical level of health care, an important development in our world has been the new orientation to primary health care by the World Health Organization which has particular relevance to Third World needs. This concept restores the balance to health care by offering an integrated approach of preventive, promotive, curative and rehabilitative services. While this idea has been accepted in principle and with enthusiasm by most governments and non-governmental organizations including the Church, it has not been put into practice with much enthusiasm. The concept of wholistic primary health care is, for many, a distinctly Christian approach as it meets the needs of the whole person and his or her family. Through the active implementation of this concept, the Church, and especially its health care professionals, have a golden opportunity "to play an active part in the international endeavor to bring about integrated and mutually responsible human development." The challenge of primary health care gives some answer to the dilemmas facing the Church's health care ministry.

International Catholic Health Institute and Medical Service

In the past, the Church has always been ready, in times of great need, to respond with appropriate structures to meet those needs. Previously these health structures have often come in the form of religious orders. There now exists a clear and urgent need for a new kind of Church response, *a new style of Catholic health structure* based on the call to all the people of God at Vatican II and the concept of primary health care and drawing on the resources of all religious congregations and laity. It is with some trepidation that I respectfully propose the establishment of an International Catholic Health Institute and Medical Service.

At the functional level, such an institute would promote the coordination of Church-related health agencies through joint planning and action. By developing among Catholic health agencies common strategies, uniform practices and training programs and realignment of resources, overlapping and duplication of services would be avoided. Such an organization could act as a catalyst for the development of programs in dioceses throughout the world, especially with respect to primary health care implementation and development, and could serve as a liaison with other denominational and secular and governmental

health agencies in influencing international and national health policies.

On the theological level, such an organization would promote the study of the Christian ministry of healing and examine the problems and priorities which confront it in a changing world.

In answering the need for improved communication, this organization could collect information concerning existing health and medical programs within the Church, undertake research, conduct surveys and channel information throughout the various organizations involved. An International Catholic Health Institute and Medical Service would be supranational and non-political. It should meet the highest academic and professional standards; to be accepted as a member would be an international hallmark of personal competence and skill. It would have career and salary structures for its long- and short-term staff members. It would contract out its services to governments throughout the world and thus would be a major factor in raising standards of medical practice to the highest levels. This Catholic health agency would not be just another international missionary organization made up of lay and religious, nor would it function in competition with other existing international agencies. In a new and effective way, it would be the chief means by which the uniquely Catholic contribution to family health care theory and practice would be delivered to the world.

This plan may seem to some as somewhat utopian, unrealistic, idealistic, nebulous and perhaps almost hopelessly difficult to implement in the short term. However, one can only point to the previous achievements of our Church and of others, e.g., the Salvation Army and the International Red Cross which were established because of perceived needs, in spite of overwhelming odds.

As stated at the beginning of this paper, the family remains the key to a healthy society, but in turn, the health of the family must be ensured. The Church, faithful to the teachings of Christ, offers the family the way to a healthy, wholesome future. In this age especially, however, the Church cannot entrust the physical health of its people (in particular the young) to health professionals and agencies which have no respect for Christian principles regarding life and human living. Neither can the Church simply rely on the various religious congregations to undertake the huge task which now faces it throughout the world. The task is for all the people of God. The establishment of such an organization would be the answer of all Catholic health professionals to the call of the present Holy Father to be "more acceptable and effective in promoting to state leaders, solutions in keeping with the fundamental right of man and the will of the Creator," and "to assist and to intervene in national and international initiatives to try and give an answer to the problems of the family . . . and to be heard more frequently." It is clear what has to be

done and for whom. The big question which has not been adequately addressed until now is *how* it is to be done.

In this paper, I have outlined very briefly a possible blueprint for a new response to the needs of mankind in the latter part of the 20th century and into the new millennium. I make this suggestion with respect, in the light of my personal knowledge of and experience with family health in the developed and underdeveloped worlds, and in the desire to contribute in a meaningful way, along with many, to the activities of the Church. It is presented in accordance with Article 37 of the Constitution of the Church which states: "the laity should disclose their needs and desires with the liberty and confidence which befit Children of God and Brothers of Christ. By reason of the knowledge, competence, or preeminence which they have, the laity are empowered — indeed sometimes obliged — to manifest their opinion on these things which pertain to the good of the Church, if the occasion should arise. This should be done through the institutions established by the Church for that purpose and always with truth, courage and prudence and with reverence and charity toward those who, by reason of their office, represent the Church of Christ."

This 15th World Congress of the International Federation of Catholic Medical Agencies was such an occasion and is such an organization. It is hoped that this suggestion might meet with some further consideration by this august body and by Church leaders.
