

Presentation on Catholic Understanding of Dignity of the Person and Health Care  
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Catholic Charities Chemung County

To understand why, as Christian disciples, we are interested in the health care and in particular today, health insurance we must understand how our faith calls to look at people in general.

Science defines the biological component of who we are. It explains how our bodies function, how we take in nourishment, how we release excess material. Science can explain much about how we function and the mechanical component of how we think.

However, to think that science explains the entirety of who we are is to totally miss the point of who we are.

To take the scientific explanation as the entirety of who we are is to see “humans” as nothing more than a complex machine, perhaps the most complex machine ever made, but still just a machine.

We are not just machines. We are special. In the two creation stories that open the Book of Genesis, both provide an understanding of what human life really is. Genesis 1:27 says we are created in the image of God, thus giving us a special dignity. In the second creation story, Genesis 2:7 says that God breathed into Adam the breath of life. It is God’s breath that gives us life. Again God is the source of our dignity.

Now, all of creation, everything that is natural to the universe is special because God created it. In the first creation story God creates the world in seven days. After each day God sees what he has created and says that it is good.

But on the sixth day God creates man and woman. God places man and woman over the world, giving us dominion, raising above all us and so investing us with a special dignity. With everything before God said it was good. When God finished creating humans he proclaimed us *very* good.

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it “Being in the image of God the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just **something but someone**. He is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons” (CCC, 357).

And nothing can take away this dignity. In *Evangelium Vitae, The Gospel of Life*, (#9) Pope John Paul II reminds us of the story of Cain and Abel. Cain was jealous and murdered his brother Abel, clearly a mortal sin. As punishment Cain is banished but God puts his special mark upon Cain *after* he murders Abel signifying that no one is to kill him.

Nothing takes away our dignity. Even the effect that sin has on us is removed by the Crucifixion. Jesus Christ is our Redeemer and restores us to our full dignity.

In our country we are very much concerned with **rights**. *The Declaration of Independence*, the founding document of our country states

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

We are created in the image of God and giving the right to life, liberty, and happiness.

In his encyclical *Peace on Earth*, Pope John XXIII spreads a great deal of time on the subject of rights.

“11. But first We must speak of man's rights. Man has the right to live. He has the right to bodily integrity and to the means necessary for the proper development of life, particularly food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest, and, finally, the necessary social services. In consequence, he has the right to be looked after in the event of ill health; disability stemming from his work; widowhood; old age; enforced unemployment; or whenever through no fault of his own he is deprived of the means of livelihood. (8)”

The right to life is not just a question of life and death. It is a question of what it means to truly live. To truly live we must have food, clothing, and shelter. Jesus himself includes these among the Corporal Works of Mercy in Matthew 25:31-46. Jesus also includes caring for the ill. Caring for the ill begins with being there providing direct care. But it also includes providing medical care. Now, most people are not skilled medical professionals. But we can help in their care by working to see that people are able to get the care they need.

As Christian disciples we are concerned with healing in two ways. As Christian disciples we are first concerned with faith, here specifically spiritually healing, care for the soul. That is the care to visit the sick, to offer them compassion, to bring them the love of God and help them in faith, to offer the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.

But as Christian disciples we are not just concerned with spiritual healing. We are interested in the whole person, body and soul. In *Gaudium Et Spes*, the Second Vatican council said body and soul form one unity (14). To care for the person is to care for both the body and soul.

Hence, our interest in health care. Hospitals have long been part of the work of the Catholic Church, thanks in large part to the work of many of our religious orders. With the diminishing number of religious and increasing costs in the medical field, Catholic hospitals are closing.

This does not mean Catholics are no longer interested in health care. Now, more than ever, we are called to stand up for the health of others. None of us would hesitate to respond ‘yes’ when asked if we wish to always be healthy.

It is our right to be healthy. It is a right that we value ourselves. In *Peace on Earth*, (29-31) Pope John XXIII goes from his discussion of rights to a discussion of **duty**. If we wish to enjoy our rights then it is our *duty* to see that everyone else has the same rights fulfilled for them. In this case, to know that they will be cared for.

Now, does the Church expect us to start writing checks to pay for others medical bills? Not exactly. If you have loved ones and you can pay their medical costs or pay for health insurance for them then do so.

But again health care is expensive. It is difficult for one person to offer much help by themselves. Fortunately, we are not just a bunch of individuals in the world. We form societies.

Each society is led by a government. Pope John XXIII speaks of government authority as a natural part of how societies function. But governments do not exist for themselves, or just for the good of those with power. Government exists, as the Adult Catechism states, “Governments and all other social institutions should serve and enhance the dignity of people” (326, cf P.T. 27).

In serving the dignity of all people, governments are called to support the rights of all people. This is no small task but let us keep focuses on health care for today.

Good health is a right. Good health is necessary for the good of the individual. Good health is also necessary for the good of society. An unhealthy person cannot fully

contribute to society. It is good for the society for as many of its members to be healthy as possible (HHC #3).

To do this most effectively is not just to provide care *after* a person has become seriously ill. Remember the familiar quote from Benjamin Franklin, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

Most people who hold some sense of the dignity of life would accept that people have a right to at least emergency medical care. But if we can get the system worked out, it can be cheaper to provide preventative treatment such as vaccines than to wait and see if the person gets sick and then try to cure them before the disease spreads to others.

Again, many people won’t argue against this. Their question is why should government pay for it, with our tax dollars! Ashley and O’Rourke, in their book *Health Care Ethics*, provide an analogy (108). Education was long considered something just for the rich. In the times since the founding of our country, people came to realize that it would be good if everyone received an education but of course not everyone could afford to educate their children. The same is true for health care/insurance. It is good for everyone to have it, not just for their own good but for the good of society, but not everyone can afford it.