

Homily
Mercy West Lakes Dedication
Sunday, August 30, 2009

It was December 8, 1893 that Mother Mary Baptist Martin and four other Sisters of Mercy opened Mercy Hospital in temporary quarters. Their complete operation consisted of two private rooms and a ward for five persons.

116 years later we come to dedicate this remarkable, state-of-the art medical facility. It joins the Des Moines Mercy family of Mercy East, Bishop Drumm retirement, nursing home and hospice along with numerous clinics and satellite offices.

We have arrived at this date having experienced generations of facilities and buildings which speak to the vision of the Sisters of Mercy and their collaborators for a century plus. Mercy West Lakes Medical Center coming on line these days represents the most recent evolution of the Mercy tradition under the leadership of Dave Vallenga – President and CEO, Steve Chapman – Chair of the Board, Dan Aten and Joe LeValley – planners of the hospital complex and Laura Wenman entrusted with keeping faith with the Mercy Mission – namely to serve the needs of the sick in a Christian spirit. Heartfelt congratulations and thanks are owed to each of them and all of their associates on this marvelous achievement.

The Medical Center dedicated today incorporates the latest in technology and medical science, striking aesthetics, a design which provides for efficiency and comfort. Mercy West Lakes is equipped to deliver the very best available in contemporary health care.

While these advances are wholeheartedly applauded and contribute to lengthened and quality lives, the one intangible dimension which remains constant from the days of Mother Mary Baptist and her four pioneering companions of 1893, is the Mercy charisma. The Mercy charisma is characterized by compassion, empathy and rendering transcendent value to each person whom the Mercy Medical Centers are privileged to serve.

The readings for the Mass today highlight two characteristics that remain deeply embedded in Mercy's identity.

The first is the fidelity to the Law of God which God conveyed through Moses to the Israelites. It is a law written on stone tablets and meant to be inscribed on the human heart. In sum, it acknowledges that the creating God is the Lord of life. Moved solely by the urgency of love, God creates each individual in his image and likeness. Each human life is to be cherished, respected and treated with dignity from the moment of conception until natural death. At the same time, God has revealed that each of us has an eternal destiny. Thus, in this context with its moral and ethical requirements health care is rendered in the Mercy tradition. The medical profession's loyalty and commitment to the Hippocratic oath affirms this truth.

Unwavering fidelity to the Hebrew Christian tradition enables us to apply to our situation the rhetorical question Moses posed with his people:

“What great nation has statutes and decrees that are as just as this whole law that I am setting before you today?”

The second characteristic of Mercy’s identity emerging from today’s scriptures is that which is addressed to the early Christian Community. Having been beneficiaries of the revelation of God’s Word, these first believers were challenged: “Be doers of the word and not hearers only . . . religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction. . .”

Compassion and attentive care for the least of our sisters and brothers was a trademark of the foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, Catherine McAuley. And thus, this medical center as well as all Mercy Medical Centers opens its doors, its care, and most importantly its heart to those who are on the fringes of society – those who are poor, alone and abandoned, the widows and orphans of our day. In doing so, however, Mercy joins the Catholic Church in espousing that health care like education and housing is a basic human right. We advocate the steps needed to be taken to insure the exercise of this right in a dignified manner by all in our society.

In a few moments I will introduce the blessing of the altar before us with these words, “Brothers and sisters, the healing activities of this facility find their source and summit around Christ’s Eucharistic table.” Reflecting upon this reality we penetrate more deeply human nature and our ultimate destiny.

As Christians, we celebrate the remarkable gift of life. From the first, however, we recognize ourselves as radically flawed, as incomplete, as individuals who wrestle with evil. As believers, we trace ultimate healing to Christ who achieved this total sanitation by paradoxically dying for us on the cross. This particular salvific event will be made present every time the Eucharist will be celebrated in this building on its new altar, keeping us always mindful of the total picture of life.

The remarkable healing that occurs in Mercy Medical Centers but always accompanied by the ultimate shadow of death brings my Father to mind. As a young man he contracted tuberculosis, which later required serious lung surgery. Besides pulmonary issues he suffered from heart failure and other illness in the course of his life. Owing to the awesome healing power exercised in hospitals like Mercy, the deft hands of surgeons, miraculous medicinal potions, the tender, encouraging and informed care of a nurse wife, and irrepressible recuperative powers he recovered from the brink of death often always to return to a normal life.

My father began to assume that it was always going to be that way. Consequently, when his bodily system finally began to shut down, he was stunned, incredulous. Eventually, with resignation he said “It’s time for dear old Don to die, but I don’t know how to do it.”

But he did learn in the course of a few weeks. Dying in a Christian context, he came to realize and embrace that ultimate healing achieved through the action which is made present on the altar and which we are called to welcome in making life meaningful.

Today we bless Mercy West Lakes Medical Center and rejoice in the healing that thousands upon thousands will experience here. Equally important we pray on an altar that we will permanently install in the chapel that places our medical service in perspective and context enabling us to anticipate and live by the ultimate healing that is our destiny.