

## **Dying for a Little Love: The Gift of the Catholic Social Worker**

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Good Afternoon.

It is an honor and a privilege to be here with you today. I must admit to some immediate trepidation. When I accepted Steve Luteran's kind invitation to be a presenter he neglected to tell me that I would be the first to do so.

Some immediate thoughts come to mind:

First, I have seen the list of the other presenters and I can assure you that I am the least qualified person that will be speaking with you the next day and a half.

Secondly, I can't help but notice that I have been placed in the immediate post lunchtime slot, otherwise known as the "zone of death." I will make a deal with you. If you promise to give me a good evaluation, I promise that I will end early.

And finally it occurs to me that presenting first gives me the distinct pleasure of welcoming you on behalf of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Denver to Denver. We are truly blessed by your presence and we sincerely hope that you spend a lot of money here because we need it.

I want to thank Steve for inviting me to speak and I want to extend a special word of gratitude to our Association President, Ms. Kathleen Neher; thank you Kathleen for leading our organization so capably. Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Denver is proud to be a corporate member of the Catholic Social Workers National Association.

Today I would like to share with you how our agency deepened and renewed our Catholic identity and became better stewards of the gifts entrusted to our care.

For all you melancholics like me out there I want to assure you that there is an order and I will be presenting my comments in three sections.

In the first section I will share with you briefly my own personal journey to be here at Catholic Charities in Denver.

In the second section I want to talk with you about the history of our organization with a specific focus on the challenges we have faced and the changes we have made in the last four years.

And finally, I will conclude my remarks with a spiritual reflection that I hope you will find meaningful.

I. As Steve noted in his introduction I have the honor of serving as the Chief Operating Officer for Catholic Charities in the Archdiocese of Denver. I am blessed to work with Dr. Jonathan Reyes our CEO and more than 260 professionals who each day carry out the mission of the organization with grace, dignity, and love. I oversee the delivery of all of our ministries throughout northern Colorado. Our service area is nearly 44,000 square miles and encompasses basically the entire northern half of Colorado. We serve those who live in the poorest neighborhoods of Denver and we serve those who live in the shadows of Vail Mountain.

As was mentioned earlier, working in the faith-based non-profit arena is a second career for me. I worked in the private sector helping to start a freight forwarding company in Houston in the mid-1980s. By the year 2000 the little company that had begun in a small warehouse in Houston with six employees had become a multinational publicly traded corporation with revenues of more than \$2 billion, nearly 8000 employees, and close to 300 offices around the world. I was a senior vice president, a member of the executive staff traveling the world specializing in mergers and acquisitions. And I was terribly unhappy.

And to be honest, I was even more unhappy that I was unhappy. The Holy Spirit was calling me in another direction. I am a stubborn and proud person so it took nearly a year for me to acquiesce to God's plan and leave the only employer I had ever known and embark on a new journey.

In 2001 I can tell you that I had no idea what I was going to do with the rest of my life but I did know that I wanted to learn more about my faith and I needed to spend more time with my family from whom I had largely been absent. Quite honestly, I'm not sure they wanted to spend more with me but they were kind enough to give me a shot at redemption. So in the fall of 2001 I enrolled as a full time student at the graduate school of theology at the University of St. Thomas in Houston.

In 2003 I received my Master's Degree in Theology at which time my beautiful wife advised me that though she loved me very much she did not expect to see me in the house during normal business hours.

In desperation I contacted Catholic Charities in Houston. Several months later I was hired as the Division Director for Immigration and Refugee Services.

And this is where I first met people whose primary interest was not in maximizing the profit of the corporation, but rather in alleviating someone else's suffering. It was yet another revelation to me.

It was also the first time I had ever met, much less worked with professional social workers. I had seven direct reports: six held bachelor's degrees in social work, and four held master's degrees in social work. Three were licensed clinical social workers and one held a degree in law. I'm pretty sure they had me diagnosed in 24 hours. They were experts in treating victims of torture, children who had suffered violent trauma, the chronically homeless, men and women

addicted to drugs and alcohol, and criminals. They dealt with people every day that for me had only ever existed in newspaper reports or stories on the evening news.

As impressed as I was by the professionalism and education of my staff, I was even more inspired by their profound care and concern for their work and for those they served. And it is a lesson that I continue to learn today at Catholic Charities Denver and from all of you.

Someone once asked me where I find Christ in my work. That's easy. I find Christ in our staff and in you because you have chosen to dedicate your professional lives to helping others in a very direct and powerful way. I know that your work requires tremendous sacrifice and that all too often you are not given the personal or material recognition you deserve.

My job now is to make sure that our organization remains viable so that our staff has every opportunity to care for those in need to the best of their ability; and that we can carry out this work today, tomorrow and next month and next year.

It is possible that an organization can become so focused on providing care regardless of the limited resources at its disposal that the organization becomes broken and dysfunctional.

Likewise we can also imagine and perhaps know of organizations that become so focused on performance measurements, especially financial indicators that the reason for the existence of the organization is forgotten.

The key I believe is to find a proper balance between compassion and competence. It is a constant challenge.

II. Let me now turn to the second part of my presentation and share with you a little bit of the recent history of Catholic Charities in Denver especially the last four years, and how we have met this challenge.

Our agency was founded in 1927 and by 2007 was considered the largest provider of social services in Colorado operating more than 40 separate programs with a budget of close to \$30 million and employing more than 500 people. Its stated mission was to "help people, strengthen families, and build community." The agency was well known for its comprehensive list of programs and services and for the expertise of its program staff.

Unfortunately the agency was also in dire financial straits. We had become overextended and had lost more than \$6 million in seven years. Reserves were being depleted to pay operating deficits. Programs were allowed to run significant budget deficits without consequence. For three years staff received no pay increases yet the agency continued to initiate new programs and expand existing ministries that were either losing money or could not financially sustain the added growth. In addition, many in the community were questioning the Catholic identity of the organization.

It was obvious that we needed to begin a process of reform and renewal within our agency.

And so began a very painful yet necessary process of correcting the imbalances that existed, and in more Catholic terms, learning to become better stewards.

We started by placing God first. This was very calculated on our part since we knew that it was likely that we would need a miracle to get us out of the situation we were in.

In September of 2008 our senior staff met to revise our mission statement. I gave staff two instructions. The first was that the mission statement had to answer three questions clearly: Who are we? What do we do? And why do we do what we do? The second instruction was that the statement had to fit legibly on a t-shirt.

This is what we discerned:

*As the charitable arm of the Archdiocese of Denver, and inspired by God's love and compassion, Catholic Charities extends the healing ministry of Jesus Christ to the poor and those in need.*

I'd like to spend the next few minutes sharing with you what our mission statement means to our organization.

In answer to the question 'Who are we?' we wanted to be very clear. Our previous mission statement did not address this question which resulted in considerable confusion about our identity, both internally and externally.

Simply put *we are the charitable arm of the Archdiocese of Denver*. We are not a parallel institution; we are not "sort of" affiliated with the Archdiocese. We are a public juridic person which operates according to Canon Law and is subject to the local Bishop. We wanted to be clear that to come to work for Catholic Charities is to come to work for the Catholic Church.

It also means that the Church's social teachings will inform all of our actions and ministries. We will always provide assistance that affirms life, and we will always demand that we treat our brothers and sisters with dignity and respect.

We also wanted to be clear about what we do. *We extend the healing ministry of Jesus Christ to the poor and those in need*. We are called by the Church and by our own baptismal vows to always bear witness to the love that God has shown to the world in Jesus Christ. The corporal and spiritual works of mercy are not optional for us. We extend not just material help, but also the very love and consolation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And finally we wanted to answer the question of why we do what we do. We believe that *we are inspired by the love and compassion of God*, and not out of any ideology or false hope in the kindness of humanity. As God seeks us in His infinite mercy and compassion we are called to seek out our brothers and sisters who are broken and wounded and to do all that we can, and to the best of our ability, to alleviate suffering in our midst.

In addition to revising our mission statement, we also began to manage our organization differently. We became better stewards. In the parable of the talents found in the Gospel of Matthew we learn that we will be held accountable by God for the way in which we use, or misuse, the resources with which we have been entrusted.

With that thought in mind (fear can be an awesome motivator) we presented to our Board of Directors a plan in May 2008 that articulated four additional goals for the agency:

- (1) To realign the management structure of the agency in order to sustain the mission of Catholic Charities and to obtain greater internal accountability
- (2) To become more effective stewards of the financial gifts entrusted to us and to eliminate the agency's operating cash deficit (which had reached nearly \$2 million in FY2008)
- (3) To develop guidelines for determining ministry priorities and mission integration
- (4) To develop and implement measures to improve internal and external communications practices

By the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the hard work, effort, and dedication of the employees of Catholic Charities significant progress was made toward achieving each of the goals noted above.

In addition to the revision of our mission statement several new practices were incorporated into the routines of the organization including:

- Recitation of prayer before all management meetings
- Celebration of Mass on the first Friday of each month at administration headquarters
- The display of religious art and symbols including the placement of crucifixes in every facility operated by the agency
- The addition of a chapel at our main office

Our management structure was realigned to more effectively carry out the mission of the agency.

The ministries of the agency were reorganized into four distinct geographic service areas; total administrative costs were reduced by 17%; all managers were required to submit annual ministry performance plans containing goals and objectives for the fiscal year; and a new practice of quarterly meetings with ministry and executive management was initiated in order to review progress towards ministry objectives and budget performance.

To become better stewards we streamlined and improved our budgeting practices; we established criteria to determine which funds and funding sources we would pursue; we divested the agency of underperforming programs; and we began a concentrated effort to upgrade and improve our existing facilities.

Finally, we began the long-term process of mission integration, especially in the areas of recruiting, training and evaluation.

Our success was not without considerable pain. In January of 2008 the agency employed 500 people. Today, we employ 260. But our ministries are focused and for the last three years have achieved all projected performance outcomes and outputs and have done so at or under budget. Ministries that were no longer sustainable have been closed and new ministries are started only after a careful vetting process.

The agency now operates to a balanced operating cash budget and I am pleased to share with you that for each of the last four years we have been able to provide for a cost of living adjustment for our employees.

I believe that we have come closer to achieving the balance between compassion and competence that I referred to a moment ago. But we can never be complacent.

Our agency, like all other faith-based non-profits faces serious challenges in the future: a continued recession; legislation that may negatively affect the ministries that we provide; and declining funding.

It is all the more reason why we must have our own house in order, that we are clear about who we are and what we do and that we practice effective stewardship.

III. Now I would like to turn my attention to the third, and final, part of my presentation.

Blessed Mother Teresa once wrote that: "The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair and hopelessness is love. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread but there are many more dying for a little love."

For the past seven years I have been privileged to work directly with social workers (yes, I now know what "processing" is) and I have been constantly impressed with your professionalism, high ethical standards, and your dedication to the populations you serve. To be sure most people in our country today are not literally starving, but so many are suffering; suffering from isolation, homelessness, unemployment, poverty, abuse, neglect, abandonment, substance abuse, depression and anxiety, violence and many other issues.

As professionally trained social workers you are on the front lines serving our brothers and sisters in need through your work at treatment centers, hospitals, schools, substance abuse facilities, group homes, child care facilities, counseling centers, and countless charitable organizations.

As well formed Catholics you know that those who present themselves to you for help are not simply material beings in need of a mechanical fix. The person who stands before you is a creation of God, fallen yes, yet also redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ; and worthy therefore of your love.

And I believe that this is your unique gift: You are, in the words of our Holy Father people who have been "moved by Christ's love, people whose hearts Christ has conquered with his love, awakening within you a love of neighbor."

Like the Good Samaritan you see the wounded person on the side of the road and unlike the Priest and the Levite and so many others you are moved to take action. Like the Good Samaritan and unlike so many others you choose to stop and render aid, salving wounds both visible and invisible. Like the Good Samaritan, and unlike so many others, you enter into a relationship with the wounded free of judgment and based on love. And like the Good Samaritan you do the very best that you can with the resources that are available to you

because again in the words of our Holy Father “you know that to do all that you can with what strength you have is the task which keeps the good servant of Jesus Christ always at work.”

I can only commend and thank you for your gift of service to the world. You have chosen to share your extraordinary talent, knowledge, experience with the wounded in our midst, those dying for a little love.

As St. Paul writes in his second letter to the Corinthians you are truly “ambassadors for Christ.”

Thank you for your kind attention and God Bless you.