

John Cardinal O'Connor speaks on health care

The following is the text of a speech given by John Cardinal O'Connor of New York at the 50th anniversary Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation dinner on Oct. 19 at New York's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. It is reprinted here by permission of Cardinal O'Connor. Emphasis and ellipses are in the original.

At the first Al Smith Dinner, former Postmaster General-turned-toastmaster general, Jim Farley, called Al Smith "a charter member of the human race." I like that very much. It goes to the essence of why we are here this evening.

Al Smith knew nothing about medicine or the technical elements of health care. Nor did he ever hear of managed care, Medicaid reimbursements, third-party payments, diagnostic rating groups or anything of that sort, all common parlance today. Yet night after night Al Smith would make the rounds of Saint Vincent's Hospital, a hospital he loved, with the doctors on duty, simply to try to bring joy to the patients, particularly those who were suffering. He did not do this because they were voters. He did this because they were human persons.

A half-century later we celebrate Catholic health care at this Al Smith Anniversary dinner precisely because it has never lost sight of this fundamental reason for its existence: to take care of human persons, to treat every person as sacred, made in the Image and Likeness of God.

A recent letter from someone discharged from one of our Catholic hospitals in the heart of New York City says it all.

"I feel compelled to write this letter to let you know of the wonderful care that I received from all of the hospital staff. The doctor was wonderful, not only as a professional of the highest caliber, but also on a *personal* level as well. The entire staff including the technicians and the nurses . . . treat you as a person and not *just another patient*. They all go that extra step."

I am prouder of that letter than I would be of a letter describing the latest gleaming technical equipment. It's not that I consider technical equipment unimportant, but that it, too, must exist and have its meaning only in terms of the care of human persons.

It is immensely *difficult* today for hospital and nursing

home administrators and even doctors and nurses to avoid becoming commercialized, to avoid becoming caught up in the marketing terminology, in quantitative competitiveness. Today there is immense pressure on administrators, doctors, and nurses to think of departments and clinics and even patients as "cost centers," to determine how long a patient needs medical or nursing attention strictly in terms of how much the government or an insurance carrier will pay for. There is a grave temptation for health care to become just another industry. Thank God for those doctors and nurses and administrators and staff who refuse to yield to such temptation, refuse to subordinate their patients to such demands.

I *know* the problems. The annual operating cost of 17 Catholic hospitals and 15 Catholic nursing homes in the Archdiocese of New York is \$1,700,000,000. Why do we struggle to keep our doors open? In order to compete as an industry? Of course not. Because we care about the human person.

Why did we pioneer in taking care of persons with AIDS, so that shortly after this tragedy struck our city, we rapidly became the largest private sector caretaker of persons with AIDS in the United States? Why do influential men and women of the Knights of Malta, represented here tonight by Henry Humphreys, visit and care for persons with AIDS in our Catholic hospitals? Why did we open the first Huntington's Unit to take care of people with a dread disease not reimbursed by the government? Why did I announce in October of 1984 and many, many times since, that any woman, of any religion, of any color, of any ethnic background who is pregnant and in-need, could come to us from wherever and we would ensure her medical care, her hospitalization, her legal assistance, if she needed it, so that she could either keep the baby or have the baby adopted? Why did we continue doing that year after year? Because there are thousands and thousands of women in need who have been helped. Why do we do whatever we do for the retarded, the handicapped? Why do we do whatever we do for the poor? Why do we specialize in the needs of the poor in our Catholic health care system? Because of our very passionate belief that every human person is sacred, precious in the eyes of God, whatever his or her religious beliefs,

ethnic or racial origin. All are persons. All are welcome in our Catholic health care system.

The ease with which *health care* can become depersonalized is little short of terrifying, particularly when we are dealing with the most vulnerable: the unborn, the frail elderly, the comatose, the cancer-ridden. I have told this story before, but I feel compelled to tell it again and again at every opportunity because it is such a shocking reminder of what can happen. It is a real story. Our own Calvary Hospital is considered, I believe, by professional observers to be one of the finest hospitals in the United States for those who are currently ill with cancer, from a human perspective incurable. Until not too many years ago, patients referred to Calvary from acute care hospitals, had an average length of stay of approximately six weeks. They lived for those six weeks in great comfort and in love, given tender, gentle care, by incredibly warm and dedicated doctors, nurses, administrators and staff.

Now, because of various new wonder drugs, patients may live six months or longer in the same loving and virtually pain-free environment, with added time to prepare both materially and spiritually for the death they know is coming, often strengthening bonds with their families, finding peace at the end. I have never known a relative or friend of a Calvary patient who has not been deeply grateful for the extraordinary care given their loved ones.

Some time back, however, the storm clouds gathered. A major insurance carrier, I am told, called the leadership of Calvary Hospital to say: "You are keeping your patients alive too long. If you *continue* to do this, we will discontinue your insurance." What a chilling effect on people trying to do good.

It is so much easier to do evil than good, isn't it? Yet, if we give up trying to do good, we lose our very reason for existence. We shrivel up and die.

William Lindsey White gave us all a grim reminder of his study of American prisoners of war in Korea. Many prisoners were beaten, starved, otherwise tortured, but *cared* enough about life to survive. Some prisoners, however, described in White's *Captives of Korea*, were not beaten or starved or otherwise tortured, yet they withdrew from all their fellow prisoners, curled into a fetal position, and died, of no medically identifiable cause. White puts it starkly: "Those who believed in Nothing, died of Nothing at all."

Catholic health care will continue its struggle to survive because we believe in the sacredness of all human life at every stage of existence, we believe in the individual human person, true heart of this city and every city, made in the Image and Likeness of God, precious infinitely beyond fiscal calculations or financial compensations. We will struggle to survive because we *care*. We refuse to be depersonalized. We care too much to compromise our moral and ethical principles, to abandon human persons to inexorable economic forces. We will never withdraw from our obligations to

the poor or to anyone else who needs us. We will not curl up into a fetal position out of fear of hostile forces that may surround us. We will not shrivel up and die; because we *believe*.

It is tremendously encouraging to me that *you* believe, that *you* care. Your presence here tonight, your never-failing generosity throughout the years—these demonstrate your belief in what we are trying to do; you care that it be done. Nor do I refer simply to your financial generosity. Critical as financial support is, almost infinitely more important to me is that you want us to continue caring for people precisely because they are people. You encourage us always to provide the most technically advanced and sophisticated procedures where possible and necessary, but far more: you want doctors, nurses, administrators, staffs to offer *themselves* to their patients, to pour out their very souls in tender, loving care. For this reason, each of you, deserves, as did Al Smith deserve, to be called a "charter member of the human race."

The city is still basking in the magnificent glow of the visit of Pope John Paul II. I have received more phone calls and letters than about any other event I have ever experienced: from Jews, Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, people of no religious persuasion. Millions never got physically near the Pope, but sat glued to their television sets watching and listening. And what are they talking about now? The glamor, the air of power, the immense amount of security, the pageantry? No. This is not what they are writing to me and talking to me about. They are telling me over and over that this man has moved them deeply, even changed their lives, because they have seen how much he *cares* for everyone. He breathes love, he inspires hope, because he cares.

I conclude with the moving words the same Pope uttered in Central Park. They are equally and beautifully applicable to Catholic health care, indeed to all of the activities in this great city, which this Pope calls the "capital of the world." I quote him and will conclude.

"In our bodies we are a mere speck in the vast created universe, but by virtue of our souls we transcend the whole material world. I invite you to reflect on what makes each one of you truly marvelous and unique. Only a human being like you can think and speak and share your thoughts in different languages with other human beings all over the world, and through that language express the beauty of art and poetry and music and literature and the theater, and so many other uniquely human accomplishments.

"And most important of all, only God's precious human beings are capable of loving. Love makes us seek what is good; love makes us better persons. . . . Love makes you reach out to others in need, whoever they are, wherever they are. Every genuine human love is a reflection of the love that is God Himself. . . ."

Thank you for loving and for caring. God bless you all.