

# Nurses Put Prayer to Work for the Sick

by Laurie Buckeye

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Cheryl Raile and Dianne Johnson were burnt out. The medical field ought to be one that closely resembles Christ—after all, Christ spent a great deal of time healing people, and Catholic religious invented health care. So why are so many assaults of what Pope John Paul II calls the "culture of death" coming from the medical community?

The story of their apostolate—*Curatio Ex Corde Christi* (Healing from the Heart of Christ), a grassroots movement to support Catholic health care professionals in their prayer life and educate them about Church teachings—starts with their own stories.

Raile could relate to the proverb about the frog in the pot: Heat his water slowly enough, and he'll never know that he's being boiled alive.

A perinatal nurse, her calling was working with high-risk pregnancies. She dispatched her duties very well. But, as time went by, her clinic's business increasingly consisted of referrals from practitioners of reproductive medicine. Raile felt the heat as multiple-birth pregnancies turned into "selective reductions" and other abortions. The water, in other words, finally got too hot.

"When you work somewhere for 17 years, you don't realize how things are progressing," she says. "Then you wake up one day and wonder, 'what's happened to me?'" Although she did not participate in the abortions, it wore her down to be the only one in the office who believed they were wrong. She took care of the patients, but lost compassion for them: How could they be so happy to be having a baby after having killed one or two? She tried to be a witness to life until her coworkers' rolled eyes and heavy sighs drove her to the outpatient surgery clinic where she now works.

Johnson just wanted to show up. A longtime coronary-care nurse, she reached a point where she needed help to get through her day. With her department chronically short-staffed, she thought her patient's needs were not being met. She became burned out, feeling emotional at work and disconnected from her faith. A cradle Catholic, she hadn't let that faith inform her life and work.

*Curatio* evolved from Johnson's desire for her Catholic faith to guide her work. "I lacked an understanding of what I was being called to do," she says. "I was not being nourished by the divine physician." She started attending daily Mass and sought out

others like herself. Through "Faith and Work" breakfasts, sponsored by the University of St. Thomas and local parishes, she met Deborah Savage, director of the Moss Program for Christian Social Thought and Management at the John A. Ryan Institute for Catholic Social Thought in St. Paul, Minn., where her job includes helping people to reflect on the relationship between their faith and their work.

Savage was happy to help Johnson, Raile and several other health care professionals organize Curatio in early 2001, with guidance from Father Joseph Johnson of St. Olaf Catholic Church in Minneapolis. She continues to advise the group and now coordinates its educational efforts.

She thinks of it as a virtual prayer community and as a n initiative to create solidarity among health care professionals through a shared spiritual discipline and education. "People on the front lines need support. They don't always know how to navigate the waters. They need to know there are other people out there like them," she says.

Curatio is firmly grounded in the Eucharist and seeks the guidance of the Holy Spirit for its members and its future endeavors. "First we have to convert ourselves, and then we may be able to soften the hearts of those we work with," says Savage. "Unless we are authentic witnesses to Christ in the workplace, others may just close their ears."

The Catholic Church has long been involved with medical care. It is rediscovering, on a variety of fronts, its interest in health issues, according to Dan McLaughlin, executive director of the National Institute of Health Policy in Minneapolis. He recognizes that nurses and doctors work in an intense environment, but has been surprised to find that many health-care workers are angry.

He hopes they will rediscover the ministering or vocational nature of their work, especially in light of the ongoing and worsening shortage of these professionals, which is an issue for his organization. "What health care workers lack today is a feeling of mission in their work," he says. "Curatio is right on the mark with focusing on this area."

This new group of about 50 Twin Cities professionals meets every first Friday for Mass and a study session at St. Charles Borromeo Church in Minneapolis. Father Rolf Tollefson, the parochial vicar at St. Charles, is Curatio's chaplain. Auxiliary Bishop Frederick Campbell of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, is the ecclesial moderator.

Currently members are studying the Charter for Health Care Workers by the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health Care Workers. In addition to being a

formation tool, the charter is part of the "new evangelization" as it helps health professionals imitate Christ's ministry in service of life, especially for those who suffer.

Anne Marie Hansen directs Gianna Homes Inc., a Twin Cities residential home for Alzheimer patients. She joined Curatio to keep the focus on her Catholic faith, the priority in her life. Working within the secular part of health care, Hansen says her spirituality is taxed on a regular basis. "The threat of euthanasia and the lack of dignity and respect for people, especially those with dementia, is a reality for me," she says.

Next fall, Paul Wojda, a University of St. Thomas theology professor, will lead the group in a study of a biomedical ethics manual put together by Catholic theologians and philosophers. Wojda, former chair of Archbishop Harry Flynn's Biomedical Ethics Commission, sees three powerful secular forces at work that make it extremely difficult to be a health-care professional today:

- Reductionism, which depersonalizes the patient by reducing him or her to a sum of their parts, such as genes. This makes it more and more difficult to maintain a commitment to the person as a whole.
- Technocratic mindset, in which everything can be fixed by better technology or machines.
- Utilitarian mindset, in which what's right or wrong is measured by the good or bad consequences associated with a particular action.

Curatio aims to counter these forces by helping Catholic healthcare professionals ground their work in their faith. In addition to prayer and education, Curatio's apostolate includes an effort to understand and communicate the value of redemptive suffering, to serve the poor and sick, as well as to act as an advocate for life and other moral issues at stake in the health care field.

Through Curatio, Dianne Johnson has committed to allowing her faith to support her. She humbly recognizes she can't do it alone, and now invites God to direct her day. A devotee of St. Therese of Lisieux, the "Little Flower," Johnson hopes that she and her colleagues will "put our roots down and be the flowers that grow."

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from Minneapolis, Minnesota*