



## Wrapped around the Shoulders of a Strong Christ

Father Joseph J. Driscoll  
President and Chief Executive Officer

A rich, colorful, and enduring image of Christ the Good Shepherd was depicted for me in a generously personal homily given by Archbishop Rembert Weakland, OSB, several years ago.

Through the eyes of a five-year-old jumping up and running to his father who was coming in at the end of a workday, we glimpsed this strikingly strong, tall man bending down and picking up his son and folding his little body around his massively muscled neck and shoulders.

Unfortunately for Rembert this was one of only a few memories of his father who died very young, but paradoxically—or as believers should we say mysteriously—this memory would awaken in him one of the most powerful images of Christ in the Christian imagination. Like a lamb on the shoulders of the shepherd, the little boy recalls his place on his father's shoulders.

In reflecting upon the reading from the 10th chapter of the Gospel of John that day, the adult Rembert broke open for us at the table of the paschal mystery an image of his younger self nestled safe and secure on the shoulders of a good father. In faith, he then took us on a journey from his childhood home in western Pennsylvania to a biblical pasture in eastern Palestine as he, and then we, nestled on those shoulders like a lamb on the shoulders of a good shepherd.

For me, the visceral experience of my small, weak self wrapped around the shoulders of a large, strong Christ relaxes my spirit and body from all the anxieties, concerns, and worries of this age, at least in a moment of quiet prayer. Indeed I shall not want from up there.

If I have learned anything from traveling to eight cities, welcoming 26 bishops, listening, talking, praying, laughing, and learning with 850 participants in these fall symposia, it is that we are wrapped around the shoulders of a strong Christ embodied in this community. We are a body that is at once national, while at the same time closely formed as an association; that is deliberate and particular in our Catholic identity; and that is intentional in our universal claim to a profession of chaplaincy and supervision. We rest on strong shoulders.

**AS A NATIONAL BODY**, we have diversity in all directions. Geographical, cultural, ethnic, intellectual, social, and even religious differences color this body of ours. While these differences sometimes pose a challenge in understanding and communicating with each other, they more importantly present an opportunity to widen and deepen our individual and collective experiences.

The pioneer, "unchurched" Northwest, for example, can offer a freedom of expression and a freshness of thinking toward a creative chaplaincy that is both Catholic in the particular, and catholic in the universal; both strong in identity and strong in diversity. These chaplains set out in their ministry to explore uncharted and uncut wildernesses where the spires are sparse and the traditional assumptions often collapse.

Or go to the opposite shore toward the founding "churched"

Northeast and Middle Atlantic and there we discover our place in history and our space in society. Here institutional chaplaincy rose within the system of government and social services to a good effect. These chaplains occupy a culture where for a time the Church could in reality be said to be the State—white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant in the distant past, and then white, Irish, and Roman Catholic in the more immediate past. For all the talk of separation of Church and State, our printed currency tells us in whom our country trusts.

Or enter a conversation with those who come from the winding roads of the "missions" in the West where earliest Catholicism traveled up the coast in a language and culture not dominant in what would become these United States. And today these same "missionaries" can teach the NACC body how to live a changing chaplaincy that adapts to new settings with new peoples from new lands.

Or sit down during an annual conference with our sister and brother chaplains from the South and discover an accommodating chaplaincy where a minuscule minority of Catholics engage in a collaboration born of necessity and practice an ecumenism bred in the culture.

Or move to the center of our country, North and South, and see how ethnicity and faith settled on the bend in the river and expanded along the tracks of the railroad. European-like villages reminiscent of the old country now dotted the hill and plains of the new country. Our sister and brother chaplains in the middle of the country can give us a glimpse into a more traditional chaplaincy respectful of generations whose history wedded culture and religion indissolubly.

Out of the symposia came many voices from many contexts of many peoples in this country of ours. Listening to these voices is like listening to the word of God—over and over again we hear the words and eventually we grasp the meaning.

In that we are national, the body is strong.

**AS AN ASSOCIATION**, we value our affiliation with one another. I learned the content of the program was less important than the sharing of faith, insight, ideas, struggles, and successes. Jesus was wise in including in his formation program for his disciples the segment known as the "come-away-to-an-out-of-the-way-place" seminar.

The theological reflection processes for most of the participants was rich, deep, energizing, and life giving. One bishop went to the microphone following his table's theological reflection and in an almost chiding voice declared, "You chaplains should not keep this theological reflection just for yourselves. Any person who does public ministry in the Church—priests, eucharistic ministers, religious educators—should do this regularly."

I remember one pregnant chaplain glowing not only from the life growing within—that was obvious in a beautiful conversation we had—but similarly glowing from the life growing without in those days with her colleagues. Round bellies and round tables produce life to its full.

Let me say, as I did several times, the dissolution of the regional structure did not intend to dissolve the regional gatherings, only to re-allocate our limited resources to support the mission and not simply to support the structure. We need to be creative in supporting the ways we can affiliate with one another at all levels as an NACC association.

In our identity as an association, the body is strong.

**AS CATHOLIC**, we are deeply in love with our Church—like we love in the *work* of relationships. We love our Church like we love our mother or father even when we can't stand what we perceive as their thick headedness. We love our Church as we love our blood brother or blood sister who, despite that love, can take on the odor of the proverbial fish. We love our Church like we love those closest around us—spouse, partner, coworker, or friend—sometimes more like an act of the will and then a movement of a feeling.

So in the normal course of the wrestling that is a part of all relationships, we still choose to remain with the person, or in this instance as Catholic chaplains, we still choose to remain with our Catholic Church.

Growing out of the Baltimore symposium on the Anointing of the Sick, these symposia intentionally focused on the continuing development of our understanding of the sacramental dimension of our ministry. In so doing, we certainly confront a familiar dilemma: a Church that is fundamentally sacramental (in all the meanings of that word), participating in a core ministry of Jesus, that is healing, which is carried out by a body in the United States where 85 percent of those ministering in his name are unable to ritualize some of those significant sacramental moments.

I learned (again) that the issue of “what we can do” and “what we can't do” is not far below the surface of this sacramental Church and its ordained and lay chaplains. Many of us have resigned ourselves to the fact that tension will be with us for this time in our history. Most of us understand the frustration, and do the best that we can do.

Yet the moment of insight in Baltimore — “what we can do”—I would suggest, has barely been addressed. The Rite of Viaticum—the “last rites” of the Church—to my amazement has never really been tried. And I learned through the symposia that like all times of change, the skid marks of resistance were all over the roads in these eight cities.

The reality is that our Church published a green ritual book that has only been half implemented. We—as Catholics—chaplains, bishops, priests, faithful—have all a lot of study, discussion, prayer, and practice to live in reception of this rich gift of the Church. If what the theologian, Michael Drumm, says is true, namely that the bishops at the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) determined that viaticum is the appropriate sacrament for the dying, then we have an important challenge ahead of us.

The other significant learning for me from the eight symposia is that the official ritual of the Church is dated. While many of the prayers and rites are beautiful and still appropriate for the ministry, other prayers and rituals are missing. When this ritual was promulgated 30 years ago, the technological advances in health care were not what they are today. For example, if we are not to baptize dead

babies, then where is the ritual for “naming and blessing” this life cut short, but nonetheless a life sacred from conception as our Church teaches.

Or what about a ritual for the removal of life support when there is no more life there to support for the time of healing has passed and the time of dying has commenced?

We all know and most of us use rituals for these events and we create them precisely because we are a sacramental people. But is it not time to at least take some “best practice” rituals and bring them to the Church for use in the official texts?

We are Catholic and in all of this tension, even more so because of all of this tension, the body is strong.

**AS CHAPLAINS AND SUPERVISORS**, we are in a profession that has standards, certification processes, a code of ethics, and status (standing) among other health professionals. This profession is the core of who we are, it is why we affiliate together; it is what sets us apart as a distinct ministry in our Catholic Church, and it is what brought us together nearly 40 years ago from all around the country.

My most significant learning from the strategic planning sessions on Sunday morning at the eight symposia was that we (the association) needs to provide our chaplains and supervisors with “products” that, depending upon your argument, either enhance the profession or lead us to the final stage of becoming a profession.

You need clear, measurable, practical, agreed upon standards. You need the technological and communication opportunities for web-based learning, long distance CPE, and so forth that enable you to become professional or enhance your professional status. You need tools—such as resources for prayer services, models for ethic committees and ethical grand rounds—that you can get with a click of a key.

And we can provide those “products” no longer alone but in cooperation with our sister professional organizations. We can be distinct (Catholic) and we can be universal (chaplains and supervisors). The two are not exclusive. And in recent years we have a sister organization (National Association of

Jewish Chaplains) to help us in integrating the two, distinct religious identity and a shared common profession.

We are chaplains and supervisors and the body is strong.

The picture of the Good Shepherd was drawn for me most poignantly on Saturday morning in each of the eight cities, when we picked up the weakest among us—those who were seriously ill—and hoisted them up on our shoulders in one body celebrating the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.

And that body was strong, because that body was Christ's. And that body is strong—National Association of Catholic Chaplains—because that body is Christ's. ▼



*We are wrapped around the shoulders of a strong Christ in this community of chaplains and supervisors.*