Keeping Our Balance
Walking in the Church

A world of imagination lay behind the house where I grew up. A field stretched out seemingly endless in the child's horizon. A well-worn path led from the edge of the backyard to the thicker growth of the "jungle," then opened up into the high hills of the sand pits, and finally snaked a climb onto the other side of the "mountain" where the railroad tracks lay. Many, many hours of childhood were spent on this trek, sometimes in the solitary world of play, other times in the company of other wild west characters or armies at war.

The railroad tracks crossed childhood and adolescence. A mythology surrounded this unprotected, no-man's land where danger lurked with the unexpected approach of speeding trains, while simultaneously stumbling vagrants slowly cut a trail in their endless path home. The singular most common activity, however, for child and teenager alike, was to balance oneself walking the rail, one foot in front of another, arms extended like the tilt of a turning airplane.

Jumping on the balance beam of a railroad track seems as natural to the human body as a knee jerk from the doctor's little hammer. It's a walk to infinity. A few months ago I came upon some railroad tracks while walking, and before I knew it, I was up on the rail transported back in time, one foot in front of the other, arms extended, stopping and going in the wobbly work of keeping that delicate balance.

Walking the rail seems an apt image of walking in the Church today. How do we keep our balance at a time in history when polarization gathers both steam and speed in the feeling and thinking of men and women who love their Church but see its direction quite differently. The late Cardinal Bernardin's call for a "common ground" project where respectful dialogue can help ease some of the mounting pressure seems more urgent with each passing day.

The recent release from Rome of the "Instruction on certain questions regarding the collaboration of the non-ordained faithful in the sacred ministry of priest" seems to illustrate in both its title and content the polarization that continues to grow in the Church today. Needless to say, this document (see excerpted passages) is of great concern to our association. Two particular issues come to the fore upon reading the instruction.
First, and obviously of serious concern for our association, is the use of the title "chaplain." For those who are certified and commissioned as "chaplain," this title reflects an individual's journey and call to ministry, her or his professional identity as a member on the team, and ultimately, one's employment status. At present, the NACC certifies chaplains — religious, lay and priests — in the name of the bishops through the United States Catholic Conference Commission of Certification and Accreditation (USCC/CCA). Eighty-three per cent of the membership of the NACC are, in the words of the document, "non-ordained faithful."

A restriction of the use of the title of "chaplain" to the ordained priest is not a realistic possibility for us. Institutions of health care and corrections clearly understand professional spiritual care as being done by chaplains. Position titles, job descriptions, hiring practices, and professional standing are well grounded in the systems in which we carry out our ministry. Even if a change in the title were desirable, it would work no more than informing nurses, social workers, pharmacists or physicians that they need to find a new name. Neither the public nor the professionals would be inclined to accept such a change.

Over the past fifteen years, the NACC has worked closely with the bishops conference to clarify the difference between our profession's use of the title "chaplain" and the canonical understanding of the title. We have collaborated through our episcopal liaison, our regional episcopal advisors, the office of the General Secretary of the NCCB, and civil and canon lawyers, both from the NACC and the USCC. Father Robert Kennedy, a well-respected canon lawyer from Catholic University, has twice issued a written opinion on the matter (1984, 1995) in response to our requests.

At our breakfast meeting with Archbishop Kelly and our thirteen regional episcopal advisors on Tuesday of the week of their annual November meeting, there was a long and animated discussion about this document and its implications for our ministry. The bishops themselves did not know about the document until they received it in their packet upon arriving in Washington. Most of the meeting time was an opportunity for the bishops to express their own feelings and concerns about this instruction and how it will be received. By the end of this meeting, a consensus was reached on two courses of action.

First, the bishops are well aware of the history of this issue of the title "chaplain" and our need to maintain its usage in our profession. They supported Archbishop Kelly in his concern he expressed on the floor of the conference the previous day and asked that he continue to work with Bishop Pilla (President of the NCCB) and the committee that he was appointing to study this document and its implications for the Church here in the United States.

Secondly, the bishops wanted to communicate clearly their support of our
chaplains in the invaluable ministry that we give in the Church. They were concerned about how this document might be heard by our members. In the words of one bishop toward the end of the meeting, "thank God, we have the NACC, who have worked so closely with us and who have this structure by which we can together address these issues. Can you imagine how much worse it would be without the NACC."

The bishops agreed that Archbishop Kelly should communicate directly with our membership through a first-class letter as soon as possible.

What outcome would we hope to achieve from this committee of bishops appointed to study the instruction and its implications for the Church in the United States? It seems that our desire would be for the issuance of a statement to the effect that the title "chaplain" is the accepted professional designation for a board-certified spiritual care provider in institutional ministry in the United States. Further, the statement would make clear that its usage is not the same as the canonical understanding of "chaplain" found in the Code (already stated as such in the definition of "chaplain" found in the glossary section of the NACC Standards).

Archbishop Kelly, when speaking on behalf of the NACC on the floor of the conference, emphasized that, whatever the solution, it be "even handed," meaning that the conference give direction rather than leave the decision to the interpretation of the local bishop. His concern is that we could again have a situation where certain individuals would not be able to obtain ecclesiastical endorsement due to a particular bishop's concern that the title "chaplain" needs to be restricted to the priest.

The second, and potentially more serious issue that emerged following my reading of the Instruction is the effect that this document will have on the morale of chaplains. For many persons, this document could be the push that knocks them off a teetering balance walking in the Church today. My fear was realized with the first call I received following the mailing of Archbishop Kelly's letter to the membership. The laywoman, chaplain and department director, spoke the following into my voicemail: "Received the letter and I hear the support of our bishops and I am appreciative. But, Joe, it feels like another hit, and you know, after awhile you just get tired of taking the hits."

Reading "Article 9" of the Instruction ("The Apostolate to the Sick") could very easily feel like another hit to "the non-ordained faithful." The reality is that the laity and religious are in fact the ones doing the far greater majority of the ministry to the sick, the dying and their families, and not simply providing "valuable collaboration." Even though we understand that this document is universal and that other countries may not have a system of trained, certified and commissioned chaplains, the Instruction still leaves a huge vacuum when there is no recognition of those who, though not ordained, are full-time, endorsed
So the question: How do we keep our balance at a time in history when polarization gathers both steam and speed in the feeling and thinking of men and women who love their Church but see its direction quite differently. Let me briefly offer three perspectives that help keep my balance when I feel wobbly and ready to fall after experiencing a "hit" from this Church that I love and call home.

First, I believe we need to keep before us the long perspective of history. I refer back to an article by the late Karl Rahner, written a year or two before he died, in which he speaks of the "three great epochs of Christianity." Rahner says that the first epoch was Jewish Christianity (30-50 AD), when the nascent Church still identified itself with the Temple. The second epoch he calls Gentile Christianity, beginning around the year 50 AD with Paul's great missionary effort to bring Christ to all nations. The third epoch of Christianity, according to Rahner, began with the Second Vatican Council in 1965.

The implication of this division of Christianity is astounding when you stop and think about it. The revolutionary change in the Church in 50 AD, both in her identity and in her mission, equals the revolutionary change in the Church in 1965, again both in her identity and in her mission. If this is the case, then thirty years away from the Council, we have barely begun to experience the changes that the Spirit blew into this historic gathering of our Church leaders. In other words, we are probably still in the eye of the storm of change.

Secondly, I believe we need to keep before us a wide perspective of ecclesiology. The Church is more than whatever anyone can say about her at any given moment. The responsibility of theologians and the magisterium is precisely the task of forming into words an understanding of the message and mission of Jesus which is faithful to the scriptures and the tradition.

The Church is an institution, but she is also a sacrament, a herald, a servant, and other such descriptive models put forth by Avery Dulles and others. In this instance, the impact of the institution may feel particularly burdensome after reading a document such as this one, but it is not the whole definition or meaning of Church.

The Church is also communion when you are sitting at the bedside, hands clasped and heads bowed in a moment of profound presence of Jesus and his Church in and through your ministry. The Church is also teacher when you are seated at an ethics committee meeting and are taking the lead in helping others.
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see the values of Christian dignity and how these get lived out in the application of moral principles in a case that you are reviewing.

The Church in her most basic form is "two or three gathered in my name," and for those of us who are Roman Catholic, it exists in perhaps its most complex form in an inter-congregational instruction. Both are Church, neither is exhaustive of its meaning.

Finally, I believe we need to keep before us a deep and living spirituality. Scott Peck opened his record-breaking bestseller, The Road Less Traveled, with a disarmingly simple three-word statement, "Life is difficult." The story of humankind is the story of difficult struggle, outwardly and inwardly, within the group as well as within the individual.

The story of Christianity is the story of difficult struggle as well. One can imagine the explosive struggle ushering in the second epoch of Christianity, when Peter and Paul took issue with defining who is in and who is out of the Church. Why should the 1965 Council in Rome be any different than the 60 AD Council of Jerusalem?

The story of Christianity is a story of a community in difficult struggle but always in watchful prayer for the movement of the Holy Spirit. Like our forebears, we need to pray always, individually and as a community, for the energy called Spirit, with a power that makes even the difficult times holy.

Walking one foot in front of the other, arms extended, let us keep our balance mindful that our history is long, that our ecclesiology is wide, and finally, that the source of our faith, our hope, and our ability to love surges from a spirituality that runs deep.