

February 11, 2021  
World Day of the Sick

Your Excellency,

In Pope Francis' message for this 29th World Day of the Sick, he makes special mention of "those who have suffered, and continue to suffer, the effects of the worldwide coronavirus pandemic," and expresses "especially to the poor and the marginalized," his closeness and the Church's loving concern. He highlights that Jesus "asks us to stop and listen, to establish a direct and personal relationship with others, to feel empathy and compassion, and to let their suffering become our own as we seek to serve them (cf. *Lk* 10:30-35)."

How clearly this describes the Church's ministry that our members of the National Association of Catholic Chaplains (NACC) have committed themselves to now over 55 years! 2020 was a challenging year for all of us. As Bishop Hying noted in his August 15, 2020 letter to you,

Over these past months, NACC members have been in the centers of suffering and death, providing spiritual and sacramental supports to patients, residents, families, staff, and colleagues. The NACC has not only been responding to its members' needs for guidance, support, and resources to provide pastoral and spiritual care in their diverse ministry settings, but it has also teamed with the Catholic Health Association's Pastoral Care Advisory Committee to provide guidelines and resources for providing spiritual and sacramental care in Catholic health care settings.

We have held several weekly networking sessions for our members during the COVID-19 months. I have been deeply moved by our members' virtual ministry, from family sessions held to help them address and deal with the imminent death of a loved one to offering funeral services for extended family. I was amazed at our chaplain priests, who both provided the Church's Sacrament of Anointing with PPE protection and the Apostolic Pardon when distance was required. How often our members were God's presence and compassion when presiding over a prayer service of a refrigerated trailer filled with the dead or being the only support for fatigued and despondent front-line nurses and doctors!

How grateful our members are to be serving the Church's mission since 1965! In Pope Francis's words, their ministry is "to stop and listen, to establish a direct and personal relationship with others, to feel empathy and compassion, and to let their suffering become our own" as they seek to serve them.

I take this opportunity to tell you again how important the critical guidance of our Episcopal Liaison, Bishop Donald Hying, Bishop of Madison Wisconsin, our Episcopal Advisory Council representing the USCCB, and our NACC Board of Directors, have been to the NACC. They have helped NACC seek to continue to educate and certify Catholic chaplains, support Catholic CPE Educators, and provide resources, formation, and a new credentialing process for those providing pastoral care to the homebound, senior communities, and incarcerated. Bishop Hying has also shared with you our efforts to strengthen our Partners in Pastoral Care Initiative and the Catholic Prison Ministries Coalition (for which the NACC is now the Fiscal Sponsor). We not only certify priests, religious, deacons, lay men, and women to serve in health care and other settings, but also continue to create resources and programs to support the formation of the many in your parishes who want to serve the homebound, those in eldercare facilities, hospitals, and prison/correctional settings.

In the accompanying document, I again share with you these developing resources. Please pass them on to the person in your diocese who oversees the pastoral care ministries for hospitals, correctional/prison/jails, and any other pastoral care need. This year the NACC will also be submitting its Certification Competencies and Procedures to the USCCB Subcommittee for Certification of Ecclesial Ministry and Service for its seven-year review and approval. We will include our materials for Board Certified Chaplains, Board Certified Chaplains-Veterans Affairs, and Palliative Care and Hospice Advanced Certification. We will also be submitting the Pastoral Care Competencies for Prison Ministries and Diocesan Pastoral Care Competencies for the Sick, the Homebound, and Older Adults.

In each of these letters, I have requested your help to communicate the urgent and vital need for men and women to consider this pastoral care ministry as a full-time apostolate. I have shared our NACC membership profile that resembles what you see in your diocese: our religious sisters decreasing from 1700 to less than 400 and our priests reducing from over 600 to less than 400. We continue to encourage religious men and women, and priests to serve in this ministry.

You can be of great help by encouraging and supporting lay men and women to consider this pastoral care ministry. NACC lay members have only increased from 980 to 1150 over the past 20 years, an increase of only 170! Catholics need professionally prepared and board-certified priests, religious, permanent deacons, lay men, and women to provide timely counsel for ethical decision making and appropriate care for their spiritual needs. In addition, many at the margins or outside of the Catholic Church seek the Church's tenderness and compassion in their time of suffering and confusion. They are the eyes, ears, and embrace of the Church to these vulnerable ones.

We continue to be struck by how many of our members have become valuable resources in their dioceses. While they serve the Church where they are employed as spiritual care providers and chaplains, our NACC members can also help prepare parish ministers to visit the sick and provide sessions on advance directives and bereavement. Some assist in the training of permanent deacons in the pastoral care ministry. We would be glad to work with you to connect our members to you.

Through our marketing efforts ([www.ChooseChaplaincy.org](http://www.ChooseChaplaincy.org)), we strive to create a greater awareness of this calling to the pastoral care ministry and encourage our members to approach their pastors to promote it.

As ordinary of your (arch) diocese, NACC usually includes a list of our members who serve in and are employed by institutions in your (arch) diocese with this letter. We will be sending you this listing in another mailing in early spring, as we want to make sure it's as up to date as it can be. Due to COVID-19, NACC members are still updating their current jobs. We deeply appreciate any updates from you or your designee that are not reflected in our records.

On behalf of the NACC's leaders and members, we remain deeply grateful to you for your support of our members in their ministry to the sick, dying, and incarcerated. We also want to thank the many who financially support the mission of NACC during our Annual Appeal.

If there are other ways the NACC can support you, please let me know. You may contact me ([dlichter@nacc.org](mailto:dlichter@nacc.org)) or Bishop Donald J. Hying ([Donald.Hying@madisondiocese.org](mailto:Donald.Hying@madisondiocese.org)) if you have questions about the work of the NACC, NACC members in your (arch) diocese, or any other concern.

At the end of Pope Francis' 2021 World Day of the Sick message, he wrote: "A society is all the more human to the degree that it cares effectively for its most frail and suffering members, in a spirit of fraternal love. Let us strive to achieve this goal so that no one will feel alone, excluded, or abandoned." Please be assured that this is the focus of our NACC members' ministry. They also keep your pastoral leadership in prayer as you lead your people.

In Christ's service,



David A. Lichter  
Executive Director, NACC

cc: Bishop Donald J. Hying  
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