2023 NACC Retreat – University of St. Mary of the Lake, Mundelein, Illinois

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Missioning ceremony opens 2023 retreat

By David Lewellen
Vision editor

The NACC’s 2023 retreat opened Thursday morning with a Mass to honor the association’s newly certified chaplains.

Bishop Jeffrey Haines, the NACC’s episcopal liaison, reminisced in his homily about the hospital chaplain in West Bend, WI, whom he got to know in his first parish assignment in the 1980s. Sr. Donna Siegel “would enter into the world of each and every patient she encountered,” he said. “She was one of the first experiences I ever had in collaborative ministry.”

And, he added, she was certified. “I know how important that is,” he said. Speaking to those who have completed their certification, he said, “You are responding to a calling, and it is something sacred. It’s a commitment, it’s an empowerment to carry on the healing ministry of Jesus Christ.”

Colleen Mas’ certification journey took four years, including detours because of the pandemic. Being at the retreat in person, “with fellow professionals who understand the process,” gives certification extra meaning, she said.

Paulina Alvarado, however, finished in one year, and her husband was such a part of the journey that he came with her from Washington state for the ceremony to help her “mark the completion of this phase.”

For Stephen Audu, a newly certified chaplain from Des Moines, the retreat in Mundelein is kind of a homecoming — he completed a master’s degree here in 2003. “It’s wonderful to come back. It’s a beautiful environment,” he said.
Bishop Bartosic tells NACC retreat of his ministry journey

By Dan Waters

Most Rev. Mark Bartosic offered the plenary address on Friday morning of the NACC retreat last week.

Bishop Bartosic, an auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Chicago, greeted the congregation with, “I’ve never entered a church with everyone singing like that!” His topic, “How My Right Hand Walked Me Through the County,” expanded the retreat theme of “Remember the Treasure.” Earthen vessels, in the sense of down-to-earth and practical, were touch points throughout his address.

A story from his parish work explored care to those with mental illness. Once, he remembered, his homily on the hypostatic union (Jesus divine and human) put the weekday parishioners to sleep – but a gentleman who battled bipolar syndrome resonated deeply with the idea of two natures existing in one person.

Bishop Bartosic’s two years of chaplaincy in the Cook County Jail allowed further development of a “five-finger catechism” – hence the title of his address. A sacramental connection was tied to each of these fingers:

- The Word became flesh – Holy Orders and Matrimony
- He gave his life on the cross – Baptism
- So that we might call God’s son our brother – Holy Communion
- In calling him brother we claim his father as our own – Confirmation
- Which gives direction to my life and meaning to my suffering – Reconciliation

Stories of the earthen vessels of himself, his parents and siblings came back to finding and renewing direction in one’s life, and to the deep challenge of finding meaning in suffering. A doctor once told his parents that they would have no children, but they ultimately had seven children. He also shared his personal journey of moving to Chicago to pursue a career in theater, then entering the seminary, and then becoming a bishop.
A deeper dive into suffering invited his hearers to consider the thought of bringing even the parts of life we are ashamed of to the altar. This is the antithesis of the statement “my life is a waste,” because through Jesus everything is healed. He shared stories of his mother’s death a year and a half ago, and the story an inmate in Cook County Jail facing a retrial that could lead to release or more jail time. Amazingly, this person said that he was good with either outcome – because “I like who I am now.” No matter what, his life is not a waste.

_deacon Dan Waters, BCC, is director of mission at St. Charles Hospital in Oregon, OH, and director of spiritual care for Mercy Health Toledo Market._

Retreat workshop uses stories to tell of cultural differences

By David Lewellen
Vision editor

Cultural competence is basically impossible, but cultural humility can be entertaining and enlightening.

At last weekend’s NACC retreat, Executive Director Erica Cohen Moore and board member Antonina Olszewski presented a lively workshop on intercultural communication styles. The dominant white American style, called “low-context,” could be described as individual, linear, and outcome-oriented. “High-context” cultures are communal, circular, and relation-oriented. Time is measured precisely in the former, vaguely in the latter. And, the presenters emphasized, neither one is wrong or right – but chaplains need to be aware of which one they’re in at any given moment.

Antonina, the vice president of spiritual care for Ascension’s Wisconsin region, said that she is Latina and Irish by background (or “Catholic and more Catholic”),
and both cultures are flexible about time. When she worked in Austria, five minutes early to a meeting was considered late, and if she followed her cultural norm of arriving at a party two hours after the stated time, she would find it was already breaking up.

She added that her cultural background is to tell stories, and she made her points with many. Healthcare workers in her northern Wisconsin hospitals deal with many Native American patients, for whom not making eye contact is a sign of respect. But that can lead to frustration when white doctors or nurses try to give instructions. “If doctors turn their body away slightly, or tell the family that they’re going to look down at their notes, you’d be amazed at how much everyone’s body language changes,” she said.

Another common cultural misunderstanding is the norm that Black families grieve loudly, which sometimes makes white staffers feel uncomfortable or threatened. It’s important to train staffs as a whole to recognize that unconscious bias, Antonina said – but chaplains are already trained in de-escalation, and it can be their role to step in. One easy solution, she said, is to offer the family a conference room to grieve in.

Erica asked participants to come to the front of the room and sort themselves into lower- or higher-context cultures. But, the leaders pointed out, most people will act differently in different situations.

“There’s no way to do it all,” Erica said – no one can learn every nuance for the hundreds of cultures present in the United States. That is why the phrase “cultural humility” has replaced “cultural competency.” And if you don’t understand something, Antonina advised, “ask questions graciously.”
Synodal process carries hopeful signs for chaplaincy

By Austine Duru

The University of St. Mary of the Lake in Mundelein, IL, provides an ideal venue for a dialogue on chaplaincy in a church that draws wisdom from a synodal process.

The NACC gathered in this place of formation for future Catholic priests and lay ecclesial ministers on June 1-3, 2023, for its national retreat. One session was “How to Navigate the Future of the Chaplaincy in a Synodal Church,” facilitated by Deacon Jack Conrad and Austine Duru.

This interactive session explored how the NACC community has engaged in the synod process so far, the next steps of the synod, and a large group discussion about how the future of chaplaincy fits in.

The facilitators provided a brief overview of the synod as a process of “journeying together, listening to the Holy Spirit and to each other, discerning the path we are called to walk together.” This time of prayer, listening, dialogue, and recommendation includes the invitation of Pope Francis to “dream about the church we are called to co-create.”

The themes that anchor the multi-year (2021-2024) process are communion, participation, and mission. The local stage, which began in October 2021, involved dialogue and listening among local churches and communities of believers. The continental stage, which was just completed in March 2023, involves listening and dialogue among national or continental bishop conferences. The final universal stage, which has just started and will last till October 2024, repeats the process at the global level. The “restitution process” of implementing the fruits of the synod is incorporated into the second and third stages and continues in 2025 and beyond.

During the first stage of the synodal process, NACC invited our members to respond to a 17-item online survey, and in the spring of 2022, about 182 members participated in four facilitated online listening sessions. A small committee of NACC members and leaders met to review the results and prepared
a draft report. The NACC Board of Directors reviewed the draft and offered feedback. The NACC synod report captured the joys of the synod process, which include hopes of NACC for the synod itself, the call to chaplaincy, broad spectrum of synod participants, Catholic life, and solidarity with the Church.

NACC identified five primary challenges facing Catholic chaplains in a variety of care settings:

- Limited availability of sacraments where priest chaplains are not immediately available.
- Ecclesial support for lay chaplains is often lacking in some dioceses.
- Well educated/trained women in ministry are often excluded from opportunities to use their gifts.
- Support for priest chaplains was lacking, in part due to the focus on clergy abuse scandal that overshadows the many priests who faithfully discharge their duties.
- Ongoing challenge to justify the value of spiritual care in the workplace as administrators are slow to recognize its value.

In our final report to the USCCB, the NACC offered the following recommendations:

- Urge our bishops to consider new models of ministry and management that will ensure availability of the sacraments, and ecclesial support for diaconal and lay chaplains.
- Recognize, support, and invest in the ministry of religious, deacons, and lay ministers in chaplaincy.
- Engage in serious dialogue with women in the Church towards greater understanding, respect, and inclusion.
- Encourage meaningful dialogue between healthcare chaplains and parish clergy and work to incorporate healthcare chaplains into the diocesan structures.
- Require each seminarian to participate in one unit of CPE as part of their seminary experience.

Participants at the session validated these recommendations as meaningful ways for the Church to fully draw on the gifts of chaplains and NACC members.
A source of hope was the recent action of Pope Francis on April 26 to increase the number of lay men and women who will participate in the upcoming Synod of Bishops in Rome. These participants were granted full voting membership at the synod, which was unprecedented. According to the National Catholic Reporter, “the new changes allow for the participation of 70 non-bishop members at the upcoming October gathering — 10 from each of the seven global regional bishops’ conferences — with the request that young people be included and that 50% of those named be women.”

We continue to pray that the Holy Spirit guide the bishops and all those who will be participating in the final stages of the synod in the coming months.

*Austine Duru, BCC, is chief mission integration officer for Mission Hospital in Mission Viejo, CA, and chair-elect of the NACC Board of Directors.*

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**Even in sickness and dying, patients are giving back to healers**

*The reflection below was given at the service of anointing at the NACC’s 2023 retreat in Mundelein, IL.*

By Kathy Heffernan

When I was in college I went on a campus ministry immersion trip to Haiti. We visited an orphanage and went to a school in Cite Soleil, one of the poorest and most dangerous areas of the western hemisphere. We also went to one of Mother Theresa’s homes for the dying. There we met a woman lying on a gurney in a darkened hallway in the back of the building. She was all alone.

The doctor with us went over to her and began talking to her gently and unwinding the very soiled bandages around her face. One side of her face was
extremely swollen. We stood back in the corner, afraid and shocked, as the unwinding of the bandages revealed a very large cancerous tumor on the woman’s face. The doctor continued to croon lovingly and wrapped the wound in clean bandages after applying ointment. She asked each of us to come up and greet the woman.

“Don’t be afraid,” she said. “Come up and say hello.” One by one, we came up to her. None of us knew what to say. We had never been in the presence of such suffering. Some of us didn’t go to meet the woman. Some of us went up very shyly and gently shook the hand she held out to us. She couldn’t speak because of the cancer. We couldn’t speak because of our fears.

Afterwards as the doctor was saying goodbye, the woman began gesturing frantically as if trying to remove something from around her neck. She had several necklaces on, one of which looked like a rosary. “Oh...” the doctor’s voice broke as she realized what the woman was trying to do. “She wants to thank me,” the doctor said quietly. “She wants to give me her rosary.”

We were all deeply moved at the gesture of this sick woman who, in her greatest hour of need, wanted to give back from the little she had in response to the kindness shown to her.

The next day we heard that the woman had died in the night.

This story has stayed with me for decades. Not only because it is a story of this woman’s healing into death but also because it shows the possibility of the spiritually healing power of illness, aging and dying and the compassion that flows in response. As chaplains, the spiritual work for each one of us is to face consciously and courageously these inevitable stages in life so that we can gently companion others through these challenges. The Persian poet Rumi didn’t know about chaplains 800 years ago but I think he described our work well when he wrote: “Through love, all pain will turn to medicine.”

Through love, all pain will turn to medicine. That is our work.
Recently I was with a patient who was in great distress because she was afraid she was a burden to her family. But I wondered aloud with her if her vulnerability, her need for care, might be a way that she was, in fact, ministering to them. “You are giving them a sacred opportunity to care for you” I said.

She paused. “That helps me a lot, actually” she said. “I feel better.” I think she found refuge, in that moment, in the reality of God’s beloved community — a community in which the blind are not left on the side of the road like Bartimeus or abandoned in a dark empty hallway when they are dying. A community in which we cannot tell the difference between those who heal and those who are healed.

The sick among us are part of the broken body of Christ. Our care for them is sacrificial, sacramental and a spiritual practice of love. As we anoint our brothers and sisters tonight, may we not only pray for their physical and spiritual healing but also pray in gratitude for the ways they reveal to us God’s love and the way they teach us courage and peace and grace. May love, the love of our God and the love of community truly turn all pain to medicine.

Business meeting lays out coming shift in strategy

By David Lewellen
Vision editor

The coming years may see the NACC move toward becoming a service organization.

At last week’s annual business meeting, conducted by Zoom, Executive Director Erica Cohen Moore and Board Chair Jack Conrad described the current state of the association, and where the board hopes to go from here.
Membership has continued its 30-year downward trend, and now stands at just over 1,800, with 1,150 certified. The breakdown is now 59% lay, 21% priests, 14% sisters, and 6% other. And as revenue from membership dues has declined, the NACC is looking harder at grants and programming fees as a source of future income.

“Due to great stewardship of past boards we have a sizable investment portfolio,” totaling slightly over $2 million, Conrad said. The NACC budgeted for a deficit in 2022, but it turned out to be smaller than expected.

“We are now at an inflection point,” he said, on the path from being a membership-based to a grant-based organization. Cohen Moore said the association is working on a major grant application now. More will follow, for projects such as upgrading technology, promoting the new certified associate chaplain designation, and more.

Discussing the strategic plan, Cohen Moore said that providing programming to Catholic partners in pastoral care, such as dioceses and parishes, may both extend the NACC’s reach and provide revenue. Another goal is to provide more entry points to chaplaincy, with steps that can be “stacked.” “We want to create a smooth road to chaplaincy,” she said. “We know a lot of you had a lot of hurdles, and we don’t want that.”

For education and marketing, the association is planning its webinar series farther in advance and hopes to survey members soon on where to focus and what the needs are.

NACC leadership has taken diversity, equity, and inclusion training as part of its strategic commitment to racial justice. During the question period, Conrad and Cohen Moore said that LGBTQ issues also need to be addressed, possibly in partnership with CHA.

The association’s structure and finance have undergone changes because of three staff retirements within a twelve-month period. All financial services are now contracted out, and the new hires on staff have revised job descriptions.
Participation in the Vatican synod process was a highlight of the past year. “It’s the largest strategic planning process ever in the world,” Cohen Moore said, “and it helped people appreciate the treasure that we are.”

Next year’s conference will be a joint gathering with APC, in St. Louis from June 20-23, and a joint gathering of all the cognate groups is a goal within the next several years. The NACC would like to move its conference around the country, but Cohen Moore said, “We’re being priced out of some cities. The coasts, especially, are very expensive.”

Following the question period, she concluded, “Put on your seatbelts and get ready. It’s going to be a busy year.”

Note: You can watch the recording of the meeting at https://youtu.be/Qp1vFCAigcg or at www.nacc.org/about-nacc/annual-reports.