

“As you go, make this proclamation: ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons” (Matthew 10:7-8).

Jesus gave these instructions to the twelve apostles before sending them ahead of him to prepare his way. Jesus clearly saw care for the sick as essential to their mission, because he saw it as essential to his own mission. From the very beginning, Jesus had a special concern for the sick, so much so that he cured the sick more often than any other action in his ministry except preaching. Perhaps we can find an explanation for this in Jesus’ self-understanding of his mission: “I have come that you may have life, and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). Healing the sick proved a powerful way of showing the life-giving nature of Jesus’ work.

And it still does today as we continue Jesus’ mission in the Church. The Catholic Church remains the single largest provider of healthcare in the world. Through Catholic hospitals, nursing homes, clinics, and many other efforts, disciples of Christ continue to faithfully answer his call to “cure the sick.” The Catholic Church also serves this mission through her tireless efforts to advocate for the right to healthcare for all people. As the political debate around healthcare continues to rage in our country, I’d like to take a moment this week to reflect on what exactly the Church teaches about healthcare and access to it.

The Church’s teaching on the right to healthcare begins with her teaching on the right to life. The Church’s consistent ethic of life teaches that, as a fundamental moral principle, all people have the right to life from conception to natural death. If we have the right to life, we must also have the right to everything necessary to sustain and support life. This includes the right to adequate food, clothing, shelter, and, yes, basic healthcare. This is what we believe, and any authentically Catholic position on the question of healthcare must recognize this.

Recognizing the fundamental right of every person to basic healthcare, however, does not answer many other questions on the subject, questions like: What constitutes basic healthcare? How much should basic healthcare reasonably and justly cost? And how do we, as individuals and a society, cover those costs? These questions, and others like them, form the crux of the political debate about healthcare today, and the Church does not, and should not, pretend to have the answers to these questions. Policy questions like these are best resolved through public discourse of the voices of experts in the field and concerned stakeholders, among whom are certainly members of the Church, who can offer their own insights from the Church’s extensive experience in healthcare services. The Church herself, however, serves the debate best by calling everyone to support fundamental principles, like the right to life and to basic healthcare for all people, and by avoiding entanglement in partisan disputes of public policy. May our commitment to Christ’s life-giving mission continue to “cure the sick” today, and may our commitment to fundamental principles guide the debate about healthcare in our country.