

Respecting Life through Positive Actions Regarding Mental Health Issues

“ Make me an instrument of your peace...where there is doubt, faith.”

In our May, 2011 Bulletin Article, we raised the social justice issue of caring for the mentally ill in the context of the Corporal Work of Mercy, Caring for the Sick. In that article, we noted that mental illness is “a medical conditions that compromises a person’s thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others and daily functioning” (National Alliance on Mental Illness - NAMI). We noted how common the problem is, with one in four Americans having a mental illness and one in six having a serious mental illness (NAMI). In addition, we noted, 10 % of American children suffer from serious emotional and mental disorders (U. S. Surgeon General). We discussed the misunderstanding and stigma associated with mental illness and called upon parishioners to learn more about mental illness and to strive to be compassionate and supportive of our neighbors who struggle with this condition. Today’s Bulletin article expands on that discussion and suggests there may be a greater role for social justice advocacy in the area of mental health.

Mental health and mental illness have long been viewed as an individual issue. The cause of mental illness has largely been viewed as intrapsychic or based on individual brain functioning. Recommended solutions have generally involved individual therapy, medication and sometimes hospitalization. The community’s responsibility has generally been to provide supportive services for those disabled by mental illness. We suggest that while this is a valuable response, it is incomplete.

Two authors from the University of Iowa, Arie Greenleaf and Joseph Williams, suggest we consider an ecological paradigm in thinking about mental illness. They point out that while mental illness cuts across racial, ethnic and socio-economic groups, there is a significantly higher prevalence of mental illness among the poor and oppressed. The authors point to the gathering empirical evidence that oppression has a negative effect on an individual’s wellness and development. Greenleaf and Williams report that oppression can cause chronic stress for both children and adults leading to physiological changes in the brain and the immune system resulting in psychiatric disorders, substance abuse and sometimes suicide.

“Because an intrapsychic approach to counseling focuses almost exclusively on change at the individual level, interventions to change an oppressive environment are routinely ignored” (Greenleaf and Williams). While there is a need for social justice action to ensure that persons with mental illness are not stigmatized or subject to discrimination and that they are provided needed compassion, support and services, social justice efforts also need to work toward alleviating poverty and oppression in general as a way to prevent the environment which can precipitate or foster mental health problems.