

First Place Award for General Excellence, Catholic Press Association, 2013-2016

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5/24/18



LORD, TO WHOM SHALL WE GO?

Facing the Stigma of Mental Illness



Lord, To Whom Shall We Go?

Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan

Here's an important word in the Catholic lexicon: *holistic*. When looking at the miracle, the work of art that we call the *human person*, we take in the *whole*: body, mind, and soul. This is essential in our works of education; this is necessary in our efforts in health care and charity.

Jesus did this. Remember when He was asked to heal the body of the paralytic? He did, but only after tending as well to the soul, as He forgave the sick man's sins.

Recall when the people were hungry and He fed their bodies with loaves and fish miraculously multiplied? But then He also spoke of bread for the soul in the Holy Eucharist.

We have, thank God, made extraordinary progress in treating bodies racked by illness, pain, infections, and cancer.

Now there seems a rising hope that we can make similar strides in healing the mind. *Mental illness* seems epidemic today.

Not long ago I was visiting the parents of an eighteen-year-old daughter who had attempted suicide. They tearfully shared with me her struggles since she was young: depression, running away from home, anger, isolation, emotional ups-and-downs. They had arranged the best counseling and treatment. Sure, they told me, there had been periods of stability and "normal behavior," but the relapse would come again. Mom summed it up:

"Cardinal Dolan, I hate to say this, but it would almost be easier if she had cancer. I realize that's dreadful, too, but at least you can see the tumor on the scans, you can chart the progress or the recurrence. Not with mental illness," she continued. "It's a mystery, it's unpredictable, it seems immune to cure."

She had a point, didn't she?

If you listen to police officers, teachers, those who work in prisons, pastors, or social workers, you know how rampant mental illness is. Drugs, opioids, alcohol are both causes and results of emotional strain. Crime, homelessness, family havoc are all often because of emotional disease.

Experts tell us that part of the difficulty is that families and individuals with mental struggles are still embarrassed to admit it, and are ashamed of their condition.

How sad! We're hardly reluctant to get treatment if we're diabetic. One with severe chest pains is foolish not to call 911. One with failing kidneys is hardly embarrassed to go for dialysis.

So why do we resist acknowledgement of and treatment for mental illness?

The Church, following Jesus, has long been on the frontlines of treatment for mental illness. Decades ago, when emotionally struggling people were shunned, straight-jacketed, and hidden away as embarrassments, Church agencies, hospitals, and homes were there, especially run lovingly and professionally by the Sisters. St. Vincent's Hospital in Westchester County is today acclaimed for psychiatric healing.

And our renowned *Catholic Charities* is in the forefront as well. Just look at this litany of services offered for mental illness:

- **Astor Services** – *6,500 individuals served last year*

Astor Services is a high quality therapeutic agency, accredited by the Joint Commission on Health Care Organizations, which operates residential and community-based children's mental programs in Dutchess County and the Bronx (primarily). School and home-based treatment services focus on enabling children and their families to stabilize and succeed.

- **Beacon of Hope Housing** – *445 individuals served last year*

Beacon of Hope Housing provides a continuum of 450 supported "beds" for individuals with serious and persistent mental illness. The 30 stabilization beds (Holy Rosary convent, East Harlem) and 35 apartments at St. Augustine (Bronx) are part of their work.

- **Catholic Charities of Staten Island (CCSI)** – *5,000 young people served last year*

The Staten Island H.E.A.R.T. initiative targets youth through CYO; coaches and members inform and encourage families to combat drug addiction. Carl's Recovery Center on the Mount Loretto grounds is an informational and referral service that assists individuals and families affected by addiction to navigate recovery resources and services.

- **Catholic Charities of Orange, Sullivan and Ulster (CCOSU)** – *3,500 individuals served last year*

CCOSU provides substance-abuse treatment, prevention, and education services, including detox services, residential services, outpatient care, NARCAN training, and school-based prevention in 20 schools.

- **Parish Counseling Network** – *200 individuals served last year*

Families, referred by parishes throughout the Archdiocese received counseling through the Parish Counseling Network. If a parishioner's issues cannot be appropriately addressed by short-term counseling, a more appropriate referral is made.

- **CREATE** – *21,000 individuals served last year*

Serving the Harlem area, CREATE provides residential and community-based treatment and recovery services for chemically dependent men and women. It also offers specialized services for those with mental health issues.

- **Maria Droste Counseling Services** – *100 individuals served last year*

Located in Manhattan and staffed largely by licensed professional volunteers and staff, Maria Droste creates a supportive, safe, and accepting therapeutic environment that provides affordable mental health care to thousands of New Yorkers.

This is *Mental Health Month*. We can be grateful here in New York that we have leaders, professionals, and services to assist those emotionally paralyzed. Can we do more? Of course! But we owe leaders such as our mayor's wife, Chirlane McCray, who prayed with us for those mentally ill last Sunday at Mass in St. Patrick's, for their advocacy.

Jesus, the Divine Physician, never stopped with healing bodily ailments. He saw deep into the soul, the mind, the psyche. Those literally in chains because of their mental illness were freed, released from bondage.

His Church, His People, can do no less.