

# For the Record: The Great Good Catholics Do

by Fr. Andrew McNair

Vast sectors of the media continue to train their spotlights on the scandalous behavior of a few bad Catholic priests. For many on the receiving end, the general public reading the newspapers and tuning in to the nightly TV news, the impression must be: This is an organization that contributes little of value to society and, indeed, does much harm.

What a cockeyed perspective the media can create! I believe Americans deserve better balance. In the midst of this destructive feeding frenzy on the Church, with so much attention focused on a tiny percentage of priests, the public ought to also be informed about all the good the Catholic Church is doing in America today. Balancing information, that's what I'd like to contribute with this month's column. My intention is not to boast, but to state the truth so as to help set the record straight.

Let's begin with what the Catholic Church does for the most defenseless of our nation, the poor and the sick. Every year, more than 9.5 million Americans in need turn to one of 1,400 charitable organizations run by the Catholic Church. These Catholic charities offer an enormous range of services at minimal cost, or no cost, to those being served.

Catholic health institutions continue to provide quality health care to thousands of people, especially the poor, throughout the country. Some 596 Catholic hospitals operate throughout the country, along with 544 smaller clinics and health care centers. The elderly and the seriously disabled are cared for in a network of residential homes and facilities. I recall quite well in the early 1980s, when many people suffering from AIDS had no place to go, how lovingly they were cared for in homes of this type. Currently, there are about 1,454 of these specialized homes.

The Catholic Church has always been deeply concerned with the plight of the hungry and the abandoned of our nation. Catholic charities all over America are right now feeding millions of people. To meet such a demand, the Church runs more than 600,000 soup kitchens and stocks more than 2 million food banks and pantries. As for the homeless, the Church provides temporary shelter for children and families, battered women, senior citizens and others. At present, about 110,858 people depend on these shelters for help. The Church's commitment to the poor also includes social programs to promote human development.

Space prevents me from detailing all the Church's selfless acts of institutional charity, but the numbers on a few major efforts will speak for themselves. Catholic counselors and counseling agencies help close to 700,000 families, individuals and groups deal with troubled relationships, emotional distress and mental illness. Catholic housing services help around 67,000 homeless find and keep a permanent place to live. And Catholic neighborhood-support services sponsor youth centers, summer camps, sports programs and senior citizens centers; at present, nearly 300,000 people are enrolled in these services.

Then, of course, there are the pregnancy services, under which Catholic organizations help pregnant women and girls receive pre and postnatal care. These service professionals offer pregnancy counseling and help women and girls continue their education. Close to 80,000 girls and women are being served by Catholic pregnancy services.

These examples, all flowing from the Church's response to Christ's exhortation in Matthew 25:40 ("Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me"), sufficiently demonstrate the Church's incalculable contribution to the moral fiber of America. And we haven't even touched on education yet. In size and scope, Catholic education alone represents an enormous force working for the good of American society. There are 7,061 elementary schools in the country, educating 2.1 million children. Catholic high schools number 1,596 with a student body of very close to 700,000. There are 235 Catholic colleges and universities in the United States, educating around 705,059 students.

The Catholic Church has done so much for so many, thanks to the Church's uncompromising teaching that man has an inherent dignity since God created him in his own image and likeness. To the benefit of our entire society, the Church regards all human life as not just valuable, but sacred. That's the main reason the Church extends a hand to all who need help.

In saying all of this, I'm not trying to undermine the seriousness of the current crisis. Like everyone else who loves the Church, I find the recent events afflicting her very sad and troubling. I pray for all the victims hurt by this tragedy. But I don't think the actions of a few ought to invalidate the work of the Church as a whole. On behalf of the sick, the poor and all those who have benefited in some way from the Catholic Church having been there, I want to say to the Church what many, having been conditioned by the mainstream media, refuse to say: Thank you!

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