

# Coffee & Doughnuts with Keith Vander Kolk

*The Catholic Review sits down with Keith Vander Kolk, president and CEO of St. Agnes Healthcare in Baltimore.*

*CR: What, and where, are your Catholic roots?*

VANDER KOLK: Growing up in the Midwest (he is a graduate of the University of Iowa) as the youngest in a family of six children, I was raised in a Christian home, but not Catholic Christian. My parents and grandparents had very strong faith, which was instilled in me at an early age. Frankly, I don't remember a time not believing in God.

I became Catholic in my mid-20s as my first wife and I were preparing to be married. Now remarried and continuing to share the Catholic tradition, our belief in God has carried us through many good times and has also held us up through some of the worst times, providing hope and guidance. My wife Shonna and I currently worship at Our Lady of the Chesapeake in Pasadena.

*CR: Describe a time when you most relied on your faith.*

VANDER KOLK: I have four children, a son and three daughters, the youngest of which are twins. Five years ago, at the age of 16, Tracy, one of the twins, lost her battle with depression and committed suicide. When the oxygen gets sucked out of your world in an instant, you tend to fall back to your core; your basics. My faith definitely helped me through the early days after my daughter's death and provides me the comfort every day of knowing we may never get over it, but we will get through it.

*CR: How has your faith helped shape your career in the medical industry?*

VANDER KOLK: Probably by thinking about the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Healthcare is a complicated and emotional industry. In the nearly 30 years of my career, the one constant has been the pace of change

from essentially every avenue: political, ethical, economic, you name it. Confusion is inevitable, but if you keep one thought in mind – “What is best for the patient or family at this moment?” – the rest will sort itself out.

*CR: What defines a Catholic hospital?*

VANDER KOLK: At St. Agnes, we follow Jesus’ example by caring for everyone, especially those who may be struggling the most. We abide by our beliefs as Catholic Christians in how we provide care, and work to both understand and respect the special needs of everyone who entrusts us with their care from all faiths and traditions. I often hear from our patients and visitors that there is just a special feel when you enter St. Agnes, and although not tangible, that really defines what we offer as a Catholic hospital.

*CR: Favorite saint?*

VANDER KOLK: St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, the foundress of the Daughters of Charity, who opened Saint Agnes in 1823. She is a symbol of strength through great adversity and serves to remind us all that with perseverance anything can be achieved.

At the main entrance of our hospital is an inscription attributed to her, which reads, “May His dear sheltering wing be over you through all the storms.” It brings a settled calm every day walking into work and again on the way home. I am confident it provides the same sense of calm to the many patients and visitors who enter our hospital every day, which is important to us as an organization

*Read more Coffee & Doughnuts **here**.*