

What Makes a Catholic Hospital Catholic

Several times each year, patients suffering from rheumatic fever come to a Baltimore-area hospital for open heart surgery to repair their damaged hearts. They receive world-class medical care at no cost to them and they and their traveling companions are given complimentary hospitality until the patient is able to return home. St. Joseph Medical Center is the hospital where the surgery is performed and it is the Catholic institution that absorbs the cost of such a gift. This is one of countless examples of the uniqueness of St. Joseph's and why its Franciscan, Catholic identity makes this hospital so special.

For nearly 150 years, St. Joseph Medical Center has been caring for the people of Greater Baltimore in the spirit of the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia, the order of nuns that founded the hospital, and the healing mission of the Catholic Church.

The Sisters came to Baltimore at the request of Archbishop Martin Spalding. He sent for them to care for the growing German population in Baltimore. Though a handful of the Sisters were already in Baltimore tending to the sick and wounded of the Civil War, more would follow and the Sisters would move into a series of row houses on Caroline Street where they established St. Joseph's General Hospital.

The hospital grew through the years. And in keeping with its Catholic identity and the charism of the Sisters, the care of "private charity patients" represented a sizable percentage of the hospital's work. In fact, in 1881, both the City of Baltimore and State of Maryland designated St. Joseph's to care for "indigent patients."

In addition to being known for providing compassionate health care for the poor, St. Joe's also became known as an outstanding medical teaching hospital. Over the 87-year history of its nursing school, more than 2,100 students graduated.

St. Joseph's was also the first hospital in Maryland to have a structured coronary/pulmonary resuscitation team and was among the first hospitals in the Baltimore area to have an iron lung, a life-saving treatment for polio patients.

Such commitment to providing outstanding medical care in the traditions of Catholic social teaching, which is based on the belief in the inherent dignity of every human person made in the image and likeness of God, led to the hospital's expansion and eventual move to Towson in the mid-1960s.

In its new location, St. Joseph's continued to flourish under its new name, St. Joseph Medical Center. It established the first 24/7 emergency physicians group in Maryland, was the first community-based hospital in the state licensed to perform open-heart surgery, the first in Maryland to develop a training program in minimally invasive surgical techniques, and was among the first hospitals on the East Coast to offer new mothers the opportunity to labor, deliver and recover in a single room.

St. Joe's would go on to open specialized units or institutes in the areas of critical care, coronary care, skeletal dysplasia, orthopedics and cancer. By 2000, the hospital was treating one in every four open-heart surgery patients in Maryland and just this year it was awarded a designation of Cardiac Interventional Center by the Maryland Institute for Emergency Medical Services Systems.

Disturbing allegations of unnecessary cardiology procedures being performed at St. Joseph's have led its parent company, Catholic Health Initiatives, to seek a strategic partner for the hospital so it can remain viable. It is my firm hope and that of many others that the strategic partner chosen will be another Catholic hospital.

St. Joseph's provides an invaluable service to the people of the region and has a special connection to many of the Archdiocese of Baltimore's 500,000 Catholics as one of only five remaining Catholic hospitals in the Archdiocese. Its spirituality is pervasive in every aspect of the hospital, something many patients seek out in coming to St. Joseph's.

St. Joe's has an extensive Spiritual Care Department that includes two full-time priests, three sisters and a staff experienced in pastoral care. Mass is offered in the chapel every day and the space outside it, dedicated to Cardinal William H. Keeler, offers family members and staff a quiet place for reflection and serenity. Likewise, the hospital's Meditation Garden and interfaith room are frequent destinations for many, including physicians who begin their day in quiet contemplation.

The foundation that led to St. Joseph's modest beginnings and decades of growth is the same one that must see it through this difficult time in its storied and illustrious history.

It is a foundation rooted in the Franciscan tradition and its Catholic identity. These must be preserved if St. Joseph's is to continue serving as it has these last 149 years in accordance with its core values: reverence, integrity, compassion and excellence.