



A member of Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis are pictured in an undated photo assisting a patient. (OSV News/Courtesy of the Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis)

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In an era of rapidly advancing medical technology, the American health care system is increasingly driven by the pursuit of efficiency and profit. But what happens when faith enters the picture? What does it mean to serve the sick and vulnerable for love of Christ?

Sr. Rose Therese Mann, a member and director of formation of the Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis of East Peoria, Illinois — an order committed to caring for the sick and poor — offers insights into these important questions.

Historically, the Franciscan Sisters, like many religious orders, were directly involved in hands-on care, nursing patients at their hospitals across Illinois and Michigan. Their work was rooted in the Gospel call to care for the most vulnerable and serve as healers of both body and soul.

Over time, however, their role in health care has evolved. The sisters now focus on forming mission partners across their health care system, OSF HealthCare, to work with compassion and faith.

"We can draw these personnel closer to Christ and expose them to our mission," said Sr. Rose Therese. "If they can have that mission of Christ in their hearts, then they can reach out to so many more people than we can do just ourselves."

Faith is at the heart of the sisters' approach to patient care, mirroring the example of St. Francis of Assisi, whose belief in the Incarnation led him to serve the sick and poor.

"When we're caring for the sick, we're caring for Christ with the greatest care and love," Sr. Rose Therese said. "St. Francis had a great love for the Nativity and Christ coming among us, taking on our flesh and becoming poor like us. That love of poverty was shown in how God humbled himself to serve us."

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A critical component of the OSF HealthCare mission is providing emotional and spiritual support to patients, and those involved in their care must remember that God is at work in their practice. Sr. Rose Therese recounted the story of James Engstrom, a baby boy who was not breathing after being born at home in 2010. The baby was rushed to OSF St. Francis Medical Center in Peoria, Illinois, where doctors worked frantically to revive him.

"They worked on him for an hour, and just as they were about to declare death, the parents prayed to Bishop Fulton Sheen," Sr. Rose Therese said. "Then, the baby started breathing."

James' extraordinary recovery was confirmed as a miracle by the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints in 2014.

While such occurrences are remarkable, Sr. Rose Therese emphasized that smaller miracles happen frequently in Catholic health care.

"There are a lot of people who would never walk into a church, who are maybe opposed to the Catholic Church and religion. But they end up in our hospitals during vulnerable times when they're coming face-to-face with their own mortality," she said. "We're able to bring Christ to people that might not normally have an ability to encounter him in any other way."

For the sisters, these encounters with Christ are grounded in the belief that all they have and all they do is a gift from God.

"It's our anchor in a lot of ways, to keep us focused on what we're really here for," Sr. Rose Therese said. "Everything that we have is from God, and everything we do is for God. He is the source of all and the goal of all."

The sisters are also strengthened in their work by their close-knit community, which Sr. Rose Therese describes as a "family" bound together in prayer.

"We're a small community," she said. "I know all my sisters, and so it's a bit more of a family sense than a lot of the bigger communities probably have."

The sisters come together daily for a Eucharistic Holy Hour, Mass and prayer, supporting one another through the challenges of religious life. "We're not perfect, but we're here to help each other grow together with God on our pilgrimage of

faith," Sr. Rose Therese said.

Through prayer, service and a steadfast focus on God's will, the Sisters of Third Order of St. Francis live faithfully by the words of their motto: "Deus meus et omnia" — "My God and my all."

For those discerning a vocation with them, "You don't need a health care background," Sr. Rose Therese advised, "but you do need a love for the vulnerable and a trust in God to guide you in your vocation."