News
News
Social Justice



Emergency medical technicians in New York City transport a coronavirus patient March 24, 2020. (CNS photo/Reuters/Stefan Jeremiah)



Mark Pattison

View Author Profile

Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Washington — March 30, 2020

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Casting the coronavirus pandemic as a moral issue, a Georgetown University forum explored how Catholic social teaching could be brought to bear. Because classes had been suspended at Georgetown, the forum was billed as an "online public dialogue."

"This crisis forces us to make lots of decisions, personal ones and civic ones," said Sr. Carol Keehan, a Daughter of Charity, who is a onetime nurse and former president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association. "Catholic social teaching is based on the belief of the God-given dignity of each person and the Gospel admonition to love our neighbor as ourselves."

Keehan added those mandates are "echoed in the founding documents of our country," particularly that "all are created equal" and "entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. They provide a touchstone to evaluate critical decisions and perhaps avoid dangerous mistakes," she said.

"All will benefit greatly from using the principles of Catholic social teaching" during the pandemic, Keehan said, especially in making sure that no one is "left out or last in line during this pandemic. We look to Catholic social teaching and those founding documents" to make decisions. "Everyone deserves protection, the unborn to the elderly, the richest to the destitute, those born here and those who just arrived."

Jesuit Father Myles Sheehan, a physician who also is a lecturer at Georgetown's Pellegrino Center for Clinical Bioethics, took exception to President Donald Trump's call prior to the forum about "the cure being worse than the disease."

"It's way too soon to talk about opening up the country and the economy," Sheehan said. "You take a look at New York now and the numbers that are rising across the United States. ... The hospitals are going to be overrun. ... We're going to be swamped. And this ongoing pandemic is going to create a greater impact on the economy than the difficult choices that keep us distant and force businesses to be closed."

Sheehan said he was reminded of Jesus saying, "What you did to the least of my brothers."

"We went out to work," the priest said, "so everyone could die?"

As a nation, "I think we've remarkably fallen down in a way I'd never expect," said John Monahan, senior adviser for global health to the president of Georgetown, and former counselor to the secretary and director of Global Health Affairs at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services during the H1N1 flu pandemic in 2009.

The pandemic "reveals the torn and fragile nature of or safety net," Monahan added. "Our unemployment insurance system covers way too few workers. Other countries have chosen to have far more robust social safety nets that workers can fall back on."

Keehan expressed discomfort over the "who lives and who dies" question bandied about in recent days. "If you've been in health care for any amount of time, you get a case of 'we have a patient with such and such a problem, we've got get him in the intensive care unit.' And the intensive care unit is fully and everybody in the intensive care unit we assume is supposed to be in the intensive care unit," she said.

"We've had these kinds of challenges before. It's never easy. We all work diligently to serve the needs of every patient," Keehan noted, adding, "We'll have to deal with these questions on an increased basis."

"It think it's a Gospel mandate that we stay away from each other," Sheehan said. " Since we have more time on our hands, we have time to think about deeper prayers. ... What does it say about God's action in our world?"

Sheehan reminded the online audience, which topped 500 for most of the forum, that when the church was under persecution, people were able to maintain a prayer life.

An atypical panelist at the forum was Reyna Guardado, a Salvadoran immigrant who runs Guardado's, a restaurant in the Washington suburb of Bethesda, Maryland. She had originally shut down her restaurant but was urged to reopen it for takeout orders, giving some work to employees who would otherwise be laid off. She also organizes delivery of menu items to seniors who unable, or too afraid, to venture out for a meal.

Even so, "we should shut down everyone, including ourselves, so this pandemic will not be worse than what it is right now," Guardado said. "I just worry about so many vulnerable people that will be affected ... the Hispanic community, especially. They will be very affected. I have the feeling we should shut down everything (and instead) sustain prayers with our families."

Panelists described the roadblocks to the rhythms of life that had been taken for granted.

"My brother, who was doing Meals on Wheels, was stopped from doing it because he was over 70," Keehan said. "I used to go to daily Mass," Guardado said.

"Imagine the people who are shut-in in our lives," Monahan said, adding Americans need "a sense that we're together — of personal outreach. It's always better in person, but a call is Plan B."

Advertisement